

# Submission to the Measuring What Matters consultation

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## Executive Summary

UNICEF Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Measuring What Matters consultation. The Government's commitment to expanding Australia's definition of progress beyond economic means is a welcome one and should help realise a future in which all members of our diverse community are able to thrive.

As the Treasurer has written recently, Australians have an 'appetite for a more conscious sense of wellbeing'<sup>i</sup> and 'healthy economies rely on healthy people and communities'<sup>ii</sup>. UNICEF Australia strongly agrees with this sentiment and the creation of a wellbeing budget. By getting the right set of measurements in front of the right decision makers, Australian public policy can be stronger, more sustainable, and more inclusive.

The Australian economy, brought on by global effects, is facing its most complex and challenging period in a generation. The ripple effects hitting Australian shores from the global poly-crisis of climate, conflict, inflation and supply shortages, cannot be understated.

There are more children in need globally today than at any time since the creation of UNICEF at the end of the Second World War.

It is with the urgency and complexity of the current economic moment in mind that the Government's decision to embark upon medium-term productivity investments in childcare, parental leave, and skills training, is to be congratulated. In deciding to not let the 'urgent crowd out the important', the wellbeing budget is timely.

One group in our community – children – offer a unique proposition to Government in the context of wellbeing budgeting. Children represent the future of our country, and their wellbeing forecasts the future wellbeing of Australia. Children present a unique opportunity for investment because the impacts of that investment compound and exponentially grow as they do.

There is now a plethora of global literature and evidence on the compelling return on investment that children represent. We know that for every \$1 spent on early childhood development, the return on investment can be as high as \$13.<sup>iii</sup> High-quality childcare has been shown to increase employment chances by up to 19 per cent and earning income by up to \$30,000.<sup>iv</sup> Failing to act however can reduce a child's earnings as an adult by up to 25 per cent.<sup>v</sup>

Childhood is the foundation for adult life and when we set children up with the best chance to thrive, they as individuals benefit, as well as society more broadly. Investment in children is the safest investment that a government can make. This is why children should feature prominently in the Measuring What Matters framework, creating a child-responsive budget that sets Australia up for future success.

To do this, we need a national comprehensive dataset which tracks the wellbeing and progress of Australia's children. Thankfully, UNICEF Australia and ARACY have undertaken to develop one through the creation of the [Australian Children's Wellbeing Index](#). The Index aims to use data to describe how Australian children are faring across all aspects of wellbeing and how this is changing over time and why. It is built on UNICEF Australia's Children's Goals and is organised using the Nest, Australia's evidence-based framework for child and youth wellbeing.

With a best-practice model for measuring children's wellbeing and progress ready to go, we are calling on the Government to adapt and incorporate the Index into the Measuring What Matters framework. UNICEF Australia and ARACY stand ready to assist the Government in doing so and would welcome the opportunity to help make Australia a world-leader in measuring and improving child wellbeing.

## Detailed Recommendations

### 1. Create a child responsive budget process by adopting the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index

As the Government embarks on this process to develop a national framework to measure progress and wellbeing in Australia, it is in the best interests of the country that children feature prominently in this framework.







As children represent the future of our country, their wellbeing forecasts the future wellbeing of Australia. Investment in children is investment in the health and prosperity of Australian society moving forward. They will become our future workforce - the teachers, doctors, builders, politicians, and emergency responders, who keep the country running. They will become our future taxpayers and investors, with their ability to contribute determining the extent of our much-needed economic growth. And they will parent the next generation of children, armed with the skills and tools we give them now to enable them to do so in the best way possible and set Australia up for sustained success.

To this end, in placing children firmly in the centre of our budgeting process, the need for a comprehensive national dataset tracking the wellbeing of children is needed more than ever. Although Australia currently lacks a national dataset which tracks the holistic wellbeing of children, [UNICEF Australia](#) and [ARACY](#) have undertaken to develop one through the creation of the [Australian Children's Wellbeing Index](#). The Index aims to use data to track, measure and describe how Australian children are faring across all aspects of wellbeing and how this is changing over time.

The index is built on UNICEF Australia's five Children's Goals. Based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Children's Goals work together to capture everything a child needs to live a good life and thrive. They are:

- Every child thrives and survives
- Every child has a fair chance in life
- Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
- Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
- Every child learns.

Data in the Index is organised using the Nest, Australia's evidence-based framework for child and youth wellbeing. The Nest was developed in consultation with over 4000 experts and children, young people, and families about what they need to thrive. The Nest presents holistic wellbeing as six interdependent domains (see below). A child or young person needs to be doing well in all six domains to thrive. Wellbeing is therefore seen as a holistic term with domains sitting within it. When many people talk about wellbeing, they are often referring to certain aspects only, such as mental health or social-emotional learning. While these are crucial elements, we need to ensure everyone working with, and for, children and young people, understands that wellbeing refers to *all* the areas of a child's life.

	<p><b>Valued, Loved and Safe</b> Positive relationships with family and peers. Trusting connections with adults in their life. Personal and community safety. Feeling secure, valued and loved.</p>		<p><b>Material Basics</b> Living in secure, stable and suitable housing, with appropriate clothing, healthy food, clean water, and with the materials needed to be an active member of society. Access to suitable transport and local services.</p>
	<p><b>Healthy</b> Physically, emotionally and mentally well and supported. All health needs are met. Appropriate health services received including preventative measures to address potential or emerging physical, emotional or mental health concerns.</p>		<p><b>Learning</b> Learning through formal and informal experiences within the classroom and more broadly at home and in the community. Realising full learning potential and appropriate learning support is provided. Family values and is engaged in child's learning.</p>
	<p><b>Participating</b> Able to have a voice and feels heard. Involvement and activities with peers and the community. Involved in decision-making processes that affect them. Access to technology for social connections.</p>		<p><b>Positive Sense of Identity and Culture</b> Identity is respected and valued. Feeling culturally connected, a sense of spiritual wellbeing. A positive sense of self and a feeling of belonging. Feeling accepted at home and in the community.</p>

Similar to the Measuring What Matters Budget Statement in the October 2022-23 Budget, the Index also looks at how we stand compared to similar countries, drawing from international rankings by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as a few other international rankings.<sup>vi</sup> In this regard, it helps benchmark Australia against our international colleagues, showing where we are leading, where more work needs to be done, and encouraging us to be a world-leader in children's wellbeing. An example is provided below, relating to the domain of Valued, Loved and Safe.

Measure	Cohort	Ranking	Year
● Percentage of 15-29 years who have relatives or friends they can count on	OECD	8/34	2006-2014
● Percentage of youth (under 18) in the prison population	OECD	8/35	2016
● The percentage of women married between 15 and 19 years	OECD	1/25	2014
● Daily minutes spent with children	OECD	1/21	2013
● Proportion of parents that are separated or divorced	OECD	19/33	2017
● Percentage of 15-29 years declaring feeling safe when walking alone at night in the area where they live	OECD	22/34	2006-2014
● Child homicide rate (deaths of children aged 0-19 by intentional assault per 100,000)	OECD	22/37	2010-2013
● Year 4 students not experiencing bullying	PIRLS	47/58	2019
● Percentage of the population declaring feeling safe when walking alone at night in the city or area where they live	OECD	27/36	2016-18

In the absence of a government-held national dataset on children’s wellbeing, the Wellbeing Index is a best-practice model for how it can be done. Additionally, the Index identifies gaps in data which should be helpful for Government as the Measuring What Matters framework is developed.

Adaptation and incorporation of the Index within the Measuring What Matters framework will allow decision makers and policy professionals to track Australia’s progress towards improving child wellbeing over the long-term, regularly feeding back into the budget process to ensure our investments in Australia’s next generation are producing their desired outcomes.

#### **Recommendation**

*Adapt and incorporate the Australian Children’s Wellbeing Index within the Measuring What Matters framework, to holistically measure wellbeing and track progress for Australia’s children.*

#### **About UNICEF Australia**

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world’s leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children’s rights by advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas.

UNICEF Australia would welcome the opportunity to expand further on the measures we have outlined in this submission.

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<sup>i</sup> Capitalism after the crises, Jim Chalmers, The Monthly, Feb 2023

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> UNICEF, *Early Moments Matter for every child* (Report, September 2017) [https://www.unicef.org/media/48886/file/UNICEF\\_Early\\_Moments\\_Matter\\_for\\_Every\\_Child-ENG.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/48886/file/UNICEF_Early_Moments_Matter_for_Every_Child-ENG.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Including the Trends In International Mathematics And Science Study (TIMMS), and the Progress In International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).