



Child health - time to look to the future

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Leading health and welfare groups have joined together to call on the political parties to look to the future by focusing on child health as they finalise their policies ahead of the forthcoming federal election.

Whilst we understand the serious public health threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated strong and often immediate responses from governments over the last two years - many of which have been challenging for many children and their families, the forthcoming federal election provides an ideal opportunity to look to and build for the future.

As experts in child and developmental health, the signatories to this statement know that investment in evidence-based strategies that are made during the early years of life will have a very powerful and positive impact over the rest of that person's life.

Responding to the pandemic has highlighted both the benefits of good policy and reinforced what we already know about the damaging and lasting impacts on children of poverty, poor housing, and social isolation. A commitment to equity must underpin fiscal, social and health policy. This particularly applies to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Accordingly, we are calling on the political parties to bring forward policies in the forthcoming election campaign that will address:

The key **social determinants of health** including:

Reducing poverty – the period during the Covid-19 pandemic when income support payments were lifted was hugely beneficial to children and their families. We saw less anxiety about whether families could meet their basic needs such as food, heating, and shelter. We saw reduced suicides as a result. Income support payments should be set at a level that supports individuals and families to live with dignity and meet their basic needs.

Housing – we saw how rapidly Covid, and other infectious diseases can spread through communities with overcrowded and sub-standard housing. Access to good housing is a fundamental human right and essential for children to be able to grow up in a healthy and nurturing environment.

Nutrition, food security and sugary drinks – hungry and poorly nourished children are at significant risk of poor health, delayed development, and poor school outcomes. Excess consumption of sugar in sweetened drinks has led to obesity and poor dental health. We need policies that will ensure children are well nourished and consume less unhealthy foods.

Climate change – children are going to face the full consequences of a heating climate. To ensure a safe future and livable environment for our children, we need to rapidly transform our energy systems and economy to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels. We need plans spanning the short, medium, and longer terms.

Child mental health – we already knew we needed to do more to improve children’s mental health, but Covid restrictions and lockdowns have added further challenges. We are seeking a commitment by governments to fund and implement the recommendations in the recently released National Children’s Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

Specifically, we call on both the Government and Opposition to pledge that if elected a **Child Health Taskforce** will be established to initially report to the incoming Government within six months on priority initiatives required to improve the social determinants of child health.

The following organisations are signatories to this statement:

AMA, ACOSS, Academy of Child and Adolescent Health, ARACY, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.