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Submitted via online portal: <https://redcap.link/Framework-OrganisationSurvey>

Dear Professor Trembath and Research Team,

APS Response - National Framework for Assessing, Differentiating, and Reporting Children's Functional Strengths and Support Needs

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the development of a National Framework for assessing, differentiating and reporting the functional strengths and support needs of children 0-12 years with developmental concerns, delay, disability and/or other health and medical conditions that result in the need for additional supports.

The APS commends the intended approach to the National Framework as focusing on all children irrespective of whether they have a diagnosed developmental condition or not, or whether they may receive a diagnosis in the future. We also agree with the position that it is necessary to understand each child and family for who they are and the context in which they live to be able to determine their needs and plan supports that will enable the young person to thrive and experience success in life.

About the APS

The APS is the leading professional association for psychologists in Australia. We are dedicated to advancing the scientific discipline and ethical practice of psychology and work to realise the full potential of individuals, organisations and their communities through the application of psychological science and knowledge. Our work is informed by a human rights approach and aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹. We advocate for a fair, inclusive and environmentally sustainable society, recognising the evidence that national and global prosperity now and in the future hinges on prioritising the health and wellbeing of people and the planet².

Please find attached our comments and recommendations about the matters raised in the consultation papers. If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through the national office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at z.burgess@psychology.org.au

Yours sincerely

Dr Zena Burgess, FAPS FAICD
Chief Executive Officer

APS Response - National Framework for Assessing, Differentiating, and Reporting Children's Functional Strengths and Support Needs

1. Why it is important to get functional strengths and support needs right for children, families, professionals and government.

The APS is a strong advocate for increased investment in childhood health and wellbeing to ensure that all children, including children with additional support needs, are afforded the opportunity for optimal development and learning experiences and lifelong success (see ³⁻⁷).

The evidence is clear that lifelong success is rooted in the early learning and school years, and investing in these formative periods yields substantial benefits for individuals, families, communities and national economies (e.g., ⁸⁻¹⁰). The Productivity Commission's 2020 *Mental Health Inquiry Report*¹¹ and the National Mental Health Commission's *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*¹² both emphasise the benefits that accrue when collaborating with family, community and the broader service system to support the learning, health and wellbeing of all children.

BOX 1: APS members experience of the negative cascade in the absence of functional assessment and supports for children who need them

- Limited access to qualified and skilled psychologists and other allied health professionals during childhood results in long delays for assessments that are required to identify the strengths and needs crucial for planning appropriate functional supports.
- Without assessments or plans to guide them, families, educational and other settings lack the guidance needed to deliver individualised evidenced-based functional supports.
- In the absence of access to timely assessment and support planning, families must draw on their own resources, posing challenges for many without NDIS or other funded assistance. Cost and waiting list barriers are worse in rural and regional locations and economically disadvantaged areas.
- Unidentified needs and lack of functional supports are especially evident at times of transition, resulting in increased distress for children and families and less participation due to school refusal, reduced/ partial enrolment, suspensions, and considerable amounts of time attending external support appointments.
- Reduced school attendance affects parents' ability to work, leading to financial pressures and lack of respite for families, contributing to parent burnout and family breakdown, which impacts the wellbeing of children.
- Decreased time in school and classrooms hampers learning and attainment and can exacerbate social, emotional and wellbeing issues influencing future academic and social choices (e.g., opting out of ATAR/university entry subjects in secondary school).
- Lack of support for students with additional needs can impact all students who have their classroom and playground environments disrupted.
- Lack of adequate support contributes to teacher stress, burnout and leaving the profession.

However, children with unmet support needs are often caught up in a cumulative downward spiral that undermines their inclusion and participation in society. Without timely functional assessment, support planning and evidence-based interventions during childhood, children's support needs may become more complex and chronic and in turn impact their learning, relationships, health and wellbeing. The accumulation of poor educational and social experiences persists throughout schooling and into adulthood and is associated with increased risks of under-employment or unemployment, poverty, poor physical and mental health and lower life expectancy (e.g.,^{13,14}). As reported by our members (**see Box 1**), these cascading lifelong impacts of inadequate functional support has far-reaching impacts on families, other children, and professionals.

Assessing, Prioritising & Reporting Children's Functional Support Needs

What approach should be used?

The APS calls for a best-practice approach to the assessment, prioritisation and reporting of children's functional support needs and strengths that:

- is first and foremost family-centred and culturally responsive,
- takes a collaborative multidisciplinary approach that is inclusive of a range of professionals who work together with the family and community/cultural supports as needed to holistically assess children's key individual and systems strengths as well as needs for additional individual or systems support. The multidisciplinary team should include psychologists, allied health professionals (e.g., occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists), medical professionals (GPs, paediatricians, psychiatrists), and educators (e.g., early childhood workers, teachers, learning support staff), and
- offers co-ordinated continuity of care from assessment, identification and prioritisation of support needs, through to planning, implementation and evaluation.

What information is most critical? Important?

- A biopsychosocial framework should guide the collection of information to ensure the child's needs, strengths and interests are understood within all aspects of their life, including, for example, home life, education, social, physical, community and so forth, and the place of their family within this.
- Important information to collect about the child includes:
 - Developmental functioning e.g., communication skills, daily living skills, psychosocial skills (e.g., social skills, friendships, emotion regulation, self-esteem), motor skills, play skills, and challenging behaviours
 - Learning needs
 - Health needs
 - Mental health and wellbeing needs
 - The impact of comorbidities
 - Strengths and interests
- It is important to collect information about the family's interactions with the child and family strengths and needs (e.g., parenting/bonding, family and carer health and wellbeing, safety issues, motivation, grief, support networks) to identify family system supports that may be needed for the child and to help understand factors that can influence the likelihood of success when planning and implementing functional supports for the child.
- It is also important to collect information about the child and family's broader community to ensure an understanding of cultural and other factors that may impact decisions about strengths and needed supports.

What assessment tools are available?

Psychologists, especially educational and developmental psychologists, are trained to undertake comprehensive functional assessments. Psychologists deep understanding of human development and functioning, including cognitive, psychological and learning processes, enables them to holistically assess children across developmental, cognitive, academic, and adaptive functioning domains to provide a thorough understanding of individual strengths and challenges. Psychologists are also highly trained in the appropriate use of formal psychometric tools such as the following standardised and well-respected developmental, cognitive and adaptive functioning tests:

- Developmental assessments (Bayleys-4, PEP-3, Griffith)
- Cognitive assessments (WPPSI-IV, WISC-V)
- Academic assessments (WIAT-III, YARC)
- Adaptive assessments (ABAS, Vineland)

How should support needs be differentiated and prioritised?

Guidelines can offer multidisciplinary teams to identify, in collaboration with the child and family, which assessed needs and supports are a priority, for example:

- Support should be personalised and culturally responsive according to prioritised goals developed on the basis of a comprehensive multidisciplinary assessment of the needs, strengths and interests of the child and family¹⁵.
- Support may need to be prioritised according to expected developmental changes or new and unexpected changes in the child and family's circumstances (e.g., parental separation).
- Intensity of support should be evaluated against the goals established with the child and their family, and the multidisciplinary team and other relevant parties (e.g., teachers), rather than determined by a "standard amount".
- Supports should be accessible noting that addressing priorities and goals for the child and family does not need to be limited to formal supports (e.g., psycho-education, behavioural, cognitive, social, language) but can also include community resources (e.g., for education and/or employment) and everyday activities¹⁵.
- Supports that can strengthen the family system around the child may be the priority for some families (e.g., parent coaching/training, mental health support)
- Around the time of transitions, supports may be needed for the child and family to successfully prepare for and navigate change (e.g., moving to a new community, the transition from early childhood education and care to school).

What approach should be used for reporting?

- Reporting should not be lengthy or complicated.
- First and foremost, collaborate with the child, their family, community and professional supports to ensure all fully understand the assessment results, implications and recommendations ahead of working with the child and family to identify current and future priorities/goals.
- Written reports that follow should be brief, perhaps in the style of an 'executive summary' including: diagnosis (if there is one), areas of concern and recommendations/areas of need and care. The evidence (e.g. assessments completed) can be added as an appendix. Recommendations should be concise and realistic.

What competencies are required of professionals who are involved?

- Professionals involved in functional assessment processes need to maintain knowledge of best practice and ensure functional assessments are implemented appropriately to improve developmental outcomes and quality of life for children and families. Continuing professional development activities such as professional supervision, peer consultation, literature review (e.g., ¹⁵⁻¹⁹) and active professional skills development are essential for all members of multidisciplinary teams involved in functional assessment and intervention planning. Psychologists are required to undertake the above activities in order to remain registered and, as such, are well placed to lead and support the professional development of other practitioners.
- Professionals need to be able to work effectively with other practitioners and families to make appropriate modifications to supports, including cultural adaptations, noting that evidence about adapted supports may be limited¹⁵.

- Professionals need to be able to formally and informally evaluate outcomes on a regular and ongoing basis against original goal setting, planning and delivery, with the child, their family, other practitioners and other relevant parties.

With a comprehensive understanding of children and their families' strengths and challenges derived from a holistic assessment process, psychologists are well-positioned to lead and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams to create tailored intervention plans to improve developmental outcomes and enhance the quality of life for both children and families.

Psychologists are, therefore, an essential workforce in the field of functional assessment.

What safeguarding should occur?

Safeguards include:

- Family and child satisfaction with goals, the practitioner's approach, and outcomes.
- Ensuring that practitioners who are assessing and planning supports belong to a regulated workforce (e.g., psychologists) and work according to ethical guidelines.
- Ensuring the 'right' practitioner, with the appropriate qualifications, is undertaking fit-for-purpose assessment and support planning.
- Ensuring practitioners refer to established guidelines for appropriate evidence-based functional supports.
- Employing quality assurance measures and standards in the assessment, goal-setting and reporting of functional supports.
- Practitioners ensure that they are well-supported with quality professional supervision, peer support and ongoing active professional skills development to remain up to date with evidence-based practices. As stated above, as a profession, psychologists are required as part of their ongoing Ahpra registration to engage in appropriate continuing professional development.
- Practitioners having ongoing conversations with the family of the child about issues relating to their safety and wellbeing when assessing, planning and accessing supports.

How this might be missed in current practice, and could this be improved?

- Consensus appears to be that the most favourable outcomes occur when needed functional supports commence early (before the age of 5 years) with frequency and intensity dependent on individual needs.

This does not mean that therapy and support for younger children should be prioritised over older children and adolescents, but that early intervention support must be more readily available when needed than is currently the case. Greater intensity might be required for those with more profound and pervasive needs^{16,17}.

- Adequate and fair funding for high-quality, safe and timely multidisciplinary assessment and planning for all children is currently lacking. With an increase in funding by Federal, State and Territory jurisdictions, several existing systems and structures could be resourced to deliver accessible, local best-practice assessment and support needs planning for all children and families who need it, for example, early learning centres and schools, or community health services. Services for rural and remote communities and diverse communities will also require specific resources to ensure that children and families in these communities are not left behind.
- Stigma, discrimination or limited knowledge of services and supports may be a barrier to families seeking timely and appropriate help for their child.
- Professionals may lack understanding and/or sensitivity to cultural contexts for children and their families and how this may impact the approach required to ensure appropriate assessments and supports.
- Substandard assessment, prioritisation and goal setting may result in inadequate or inappropriate support and poor outcomes.

In summary, the APS supports the development and implementation of an appropriate National Framework that provides a pathway for all children and families to have access to high-quality functional assessment and intervention

planning when needed and irrespective of whether they have a diagnosed developmental condition or not, or whether they may receive a diagnosis in the future. The APS calls for a family-centred, culturally responsive and holistic approach to functional assessment and the essential role of multidisciplinary teams comprising psychologists, allied health professionals and other health practitioners to be embedded within the National Framework. Entrenching these critical features into the National Framework will be essential to ensuring a holistic understanding of children's contextualised needs, strengths, and interests across domains. This will translate into appropriate support planning and implementation that will enable them to thrive and experience success in life.

Finally, we take this opportunity to advocate for adequate investment in the implementation of the National Framework, which must include investing in psychologists and the multidisciplinary workforce. Without this investment, the National Framework is unlikely to achieve its objectives.

The APS would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank the members who so kindly contributed their time, knowledge, experience and evidence-based research to the development of this submission.

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