



Submission: Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2029 Exposure Draft.

7 March 2025



The Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation

Serving Defence Families with the Defence Kids Program

- For nearly a decade, the Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation (AKKF) has partnered with the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) to deliver the successful Defence Kids program, supporting children of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force members.
- Established in 2002, The Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation provides evidence-based, age-appropriate, early intervention and preventative mental health services to children aged 8-18 years old.
- Children living in families impacted by family mental illness are three times more likely to experience their own mental health challenges compared to the broader population. [i]
- Early intervention programs, such as the Defence Kids Program, seek to divert at-risk children away from future health problems and help restore them to full functioning as quickly as possible.
- Designed by mental health professionals, our programs are proven to empower children to thrive beyond the impacts of family mental illness. Delivered within a peer-based, social and recreational setting, our Kookaburra Kids programs aim to provide connection, improve mental health literacy and encourage help-seeking behaviours.
- Teaching young people about mental health not only equips them with essential coping strategies and help-seeking skills but also plays a crucial role in reducing stigma—an issue that is consistently identified as a key barrier to accessing mental health services.
- Kookaburra Kids has recently appointed two new Board Directors and employed a new Senior Leader, all with strong mental health clinical backgrounds as part of our commitment to supporting Australian children impacted by family mental illness.
- Kookaburra Kids has a strong commitment to academic research and independent evaluation of our programs and activities. In 2023, our research was honoured in the Journal of Military and Veterans' Health Awards, winning the award for Best New Author for our paper, focused on looking at changes in perceptions about mental health, and help-seeking intentions, following a Kookaburra Kids program for young people in current serving and ex-serving, military families.
- A recent independent, and third-party validated, evaluation of our Defence Kids Program found that outcomes were exceeding the intended objectives, that the need for the program was increasing, and that Australian Kookaburra Kids was unique in its expertise and experience to continue to deliver the programs.

Feedback on the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

Overview

The Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation is supportive of the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and believes it is an important step forward in addressing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide and supporting mental health and wellbeing of the Defence and Veteran community more generally.

Kookaburra Kids supports the expanded definition of the term Defence and Veteran community to encompass families of Veteran and Defence personnel. Kookaburra Kids has witnessed firsthand the impact that Defence life can have on the mental health and wellbeing of Defence children and it is vital that they are recognised in relevant Defence and Veteran policy and strategy.

Kookaburra Kids supports the Strategy's holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing, recognising it as a continuum. We commend the Strategy's shift beyond individual, health-based models to prioritise prevention and early intervention, aiming to keep healthy individuals well while enhancing pathways to optimal health. Kookaburra Kids believes this approach will have the greatest long-term impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the Defence and Veteran community, especially children and young people.

The approach of the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy aligns with Kookaburra Kids' work in supporting mental health outcomes of children of current and ex-serving defence personnel. Kookaburra Kids works with young people who are at increased risk of poor mental health due to the presence of mental illness in a parent or other family member. Our programs integrate mental health education with recreational activities and target mental health literacy, peer connection, and help seeking behaviour, as known protective factors for mental wellbeing. [i] [ii] [iii] [iv] [v]

Priority actions or initiatives Kookaburra Kids believe Government should take to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the Defence and Veteran community

Defence life poses unique challenges for young people, and dedicated programs and initiatives that are readily accessible and tailored to the specific needs of children from Defence and Veteran families are vital to support the mental health and wellbeing of these young people.

Kookaburra Kids encourages the Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to ensure children of Defence and Veteran families are not overlooked in the action plans resulting from this Strategy and recommends the development of an action plan that specifically targets the children of Defence and Veteran personnel.

Kookaburra Kids has recently put forward a submission to the Australian Government Pre-Budget Submission process for a 4-year renewal of our Defence Kids program, a program that would significantly contribute to the goals of the Defence and Veteran Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

If the submission is successful, it will enable national delivery of vital mental health prevention and early intervention programs to children (8-18 yrs) of Defence and Veteran personnel. The proposal runs until 30 June 2029 and would enable Kookaburra Kids to continue to provide the full Kookaburra Kids Stepped Care model with access to:

- Kookaburra Kids Connect (Digital)
- Short Activity Days (3 hours)
- Full Activity Days (6 hours)
- Camps (2 days)

This proposal aims to deliver over 1,000 programs nationwide over four years, supporting our Defence Kids to improve their mental health and well-being. This aligns closely with Goal 1 & 2 of the strategy.

Additionally, the Defence Kids program has a robust research and evaluation component that has been measuring the impact of Kookaburra Kids' program for several years – aligning with Goal 6 of the strategy.

These research outcomes not only demonstrate the effectiveness of the Defence Kids program but can also be used to inform future service planning for the Defence and Veteran community.

A recent independent evaluation of our Defence Kids program, which reviewed all aspects, including clinical outcomes, identified the following:

1. Our Defence Kids program delivers numerous beneficial outcomes to young people from Defence families. a. The program effectively works to increase a sense of connectedness, mental health literacy, and help-seeking behaviours. b. The program delivers numerous other benefits to Defence families and the Defence community beyond the intended outcomes.
2. The need for the Defence Kids program is increasing as mental health problems are a growing concern amongst the Defence community. a. Stakeholders have indicated that there are significantly more young people whom the Program could reach and benefit. b. The need for a preventative mental health intervention for young people from Defence families remains strong, and evidence suggests it is increasing.
3. The Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation has a highly skilled and passionate workforce committed to delivering the Defence Kids program. a. Numerous AKKF employees come from Defence backgrounds and have first-hand experience with the Defence lifestyle. b. Many AKKF employees have a clinical background and/or numerous years of experience working with children

We encourage the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defence to include Kookaburra Kids programs in relevant action plans as a matter of urgency in order to support mental health and wellbeing outcomes of Defence Kids.

We look forward to working collaboratively with the Government, Defence, and Veteran communities to implement meaningful solutions that prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of the next generation.

Our Patron and Ambassadors

We are so proud, thankful and honoured of the work Ambassadors and Patrons continue to do in support of the Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation. Among them, they are Politicians, high profile Government officials and media personalities. However, all are advocates within the mental health sector, taking every opportunity to further promote and support the work of the Foundation.



Patron
John Brogden
AM



Ambassador
Allan Sparkes
CV, OAM, VA, FRSN



Ambassador
Jessica Rowe
AM



Ambassador
Dr Andrew
Charleton MP



Ambassdor
Lucy Brogden
AM



Ambassador
The Hon. Scott Morrison



Ambassador
Peter Overton
AM



Ambassador
Belinda Neil



Ambassador
Rose Cox

References

- [i] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). Australia's health 2020 data insights. Australia's health series no. 17. Cat. no. AUS 231. Canberra: AIHW.
- [ii] Riebschleger, J., Costello, S., Cavanaugh, D. L., & Grové, C. (2019). Mental health literacy of youth that have a family member with a mental illness: Outcomes from a new program and scale. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10(2), 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00002>
- [iii] Fudge, E., & Mason, P. (2004). Consulting with young people about service guidelines relating to parental mental illness. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 3(2).
www.auseinet.com/journal/vol3iss2/fudgemason.pdf
- [iv] Maybery, D. J., Ling, L., Szakacs, E., & Reupert, A. E. (2005). Children of a parent with a mental illness: Perspectives on need. *Australian e-Journal of Mental Health*, 4(2), 1-11.
- [v] Hosman, C. M. H., van Doesum, K. T. M., & van Santvoort, F. (2009). Prevention of emotional problems and psychiatric risks in children of parents with a mental illness in the Netherlands: I. The scientific basis to a comprehensive approach. *Australian E-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 8(3), 250–263.
<https://doi.org/10.5172/jamh.8.3.250>



Defence Kids Program



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Kookaburra Kids' Defence Kids program is delivered with the generous support of the Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Further Information



Australian
Kookaburra Kids
Foundation