

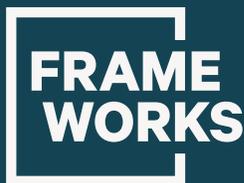
INTERIM FINDINGS

Listening to Mindsets: Cultural Mindsets of Early Childhood in Australia

Executive Summary

FrameWorks Institute, in partnership
with Curijo and Minderoo Foundation

JANUARY 2026



MEASURING MINDSETS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD IN
AUSTRALIA PROJECT

The FrameWorks Institute acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We extend our respect to Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we conduct research, to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose wisdom contributes to our future. The research for this report took place on Ngemba (Ngiyaampa), Baakindji (Barkandji), Murrawarri, and Kunya lands (Bourke); Kurna lands (Port Adelaide); and Gimuy Walubara Yidinji and Yirrganydji lands (Cairns).

We use the terminology *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples* in this report. We recognise there is diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with ~250 languages and complex links to different Country and kin throughout Australia. We also recognise differing preferences regarding the use of terminology and that many people prefer to be known by their specific group name, their Country, as Traditional Owners and Custodians and/or as First Nations People.

This report focuses on findings from a set of qualitative focus groups conducted with both non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander people, including CALD groups, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in April and June 2025, respectively. **This research recognises the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of communities across Australia. We acknowledge that people from CALD backgrounds have varied experiences. The findings presented in this report reflect the views of participants who speak English and were able to take part in online focus groups. As such, they do not fully capture the experiences of all CALD communities. Including this rich diversity would require place-based, in-person engagement within communities and is beyond the scope of the research undertaken at this stage.**

CONTENT WARNING

Two mindsets described in the full report (the Otherism and Pathologising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture mindsets) contain harmful racist and bigoted thinking about certain groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some readers may find descriptions of this type of thinking triggering. For a list of national support services, including culturally safe services, see Appendix B in the full report.

The descriptions of these mindsets are included in this report because they are present in public thinking in Australia. We understand that describing these mindsets is complicated and not without risks. However, it's important to understand these harmful assumptions so we can develop framing and narrative strategies to counter and overcome them and so we can ensure that these mindsets aren't being unintentionally triggered by the way we communicate about the early years. By describing these mindsets, we are in no way condoning them; on the contrary, we recognise them as highly toxic and we describe them with the goal of changing these harmful ways of thinking.



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The early childhood sector in Australia is at an important turning point. Advocates see a chance to improve national and state programs that help children and families from pregnancy through age 5, which will make lasting changes that support children's health and wellbeing. To do this, advocates need to focus on more than just policies – they also need to consider the deeply held ideas and understandings people have about children, families and communities. This means understanding how Australians think about the early years and finding better ways to talk about and explain why early childhood matters, both now and in the future.

Undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute, in partnership with Curijo and Minderoo Foundation, this project aims to better understand how Australians think about the early years and develop framing and narrative strategies that can shift these mindsets in ways that increase support for policies that more robustly meet the needs of all young children and their families.

This project expands on previous research which shows how mindsets influence policy support for early childhood in Australia.¹ Since 2010, FrameWorks has worked with partners in Australia to identify mindsets related to children and families and to design and test framing strategies to shift these ways of thinking and build support for systemic change. The current project examines mindsets over time and includes the experiences of Australians from diverse backgrounds, particularly the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) groups.² Over the course of four years, FrameWorks will work with partners to identify and track mindsets related to the early years across the Australian population and develop framing recommendations to shift these mindsets and build support for systemic change. Key partners include an advisory group (composed of experts, including two representatives from Aboriginal-controlled organisations) and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community reference group.

This project supports the work that early years researchers, advocates and practitioners are already doing in Australia by offering new insights on mindsets that present both challenges and opportunities to change efforts. The project is in service of larger efforts to respond to in-the-moment opportunities and challenges while also shifting mindsets in meaningful and sustained ways over time.

The goals for the project are the following:

1. Measure the **distribution of mindsets** people use to think about early childhood issues across the Australian population, examining demographic and geographic differences in the relative strength of different mindsets in shaping thinking. There is a particular focus on identifying mindsets among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as people belonging to CALD groups.
2. Examine relationships among mindsets to find **mindset clusters**, or ways that groups of mindsets hang together in people's thinking about early childhood issues.
3. Explore **connections between mindsets and policy/solutions support** to better understand how mindsets shape people's preferences for policy solutions.
4. Shape the **ongoing conversation about early childhood** in Australia by producing framing and narrative strategies and delivering workshops and presentations to share findings and support their use in communications.

The report that accompanies this executive summary focuses on findings from a set of qualitative focus groups conducted with both non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander people, including CALD groups, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in April and June 2025, respectively. This research recognises the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of communities across Australia. We acknowledge that people from CALD backgrounds have varied experiences. The findings presented in this report reflect the views of participants who speak English and were able to take part in online focus groups. As such, they do not fully capture the experiences of all CALD communities. Including this rich diversity would require place-based, in-person engagement within communities and is beyond the scope of the research undertaken at this stage.

We found that these mindsets are shared across demographic groups, but there are also differences between groups in terms of how strongly people hold these ways of thinking and the effect these mindsets have on how groups understand early childhood issues. These mindsets present both challenges and opportunities for the early childhood sector. In this report, we provide initial ideas for how advocates can navigate the challenges and opportunities to build support for early childhood policies and reforms.

We are using the qualitative findings described in this report to inform the design of a quantitative survey that will measure the strength and distribution of mindsets across the Australian population, as well as identify any connections among mindsets and the ways that mindsets affect support for policy solutions. The survey will shed more light on these similarities and differences and provide a more detailed and statistical sense of how they are distributed across and within populations in Australia. This survey will be fielded twice per year for the next three years to track mindsets over time. It will allow us to see any shifts in mindsets over time, as well as whether particular contextual moments affect mindsets. In conjunction with this longitudinal survey, FrameWorks will empirically test framing strategies to better communicate about the early years. All of this research will inform the development of a broader narrative strategy for the early

childhood sector, designed in collaboration with partners (including the project advisory group and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community reference group, among others). This strategy will give the sector the communication tools they need to shift public thinking and build support for lasting reforms to improve outcomes for children and families across Australia.

Table 1: Challenges in public thinking*

Challenge	Mindsets that underlie this challenge	Demographic similarities and differences	Strategies for navigating this challenge
Challenge #1: Individualistic mindsets keep people from seeing the effects of environments, contexts and systems, which reduces support for policies and reforms that are designed to change them.	<p>The <i>Individualism</i> mindset is rooted in the assumption that what happens in life is primarily or exclusively due to individual choice and willpower.</p> <p>The <i>Family Bubble</i> mindset assumes that parents are narrowly and ultimately responsible for children's development and wellbeing.</p>	<p><i>Individualism</i> and <i>Family Bubble</i> mindsets are present among all groups but dominant among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander groups (both non-CALD and CALD) and recessive among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.</p>	<p>Lead with discussions of how context, place and systems shape children's outcomes to overcome individualistic thinking.</p> <p>Talk about what needs to change to better support all children and families across Australia.</p>
Challenge #2: Assumptions that parenting and child development outcomes are natural reduce support for efforts to intervene to improve outcomes.	<p>The <i>Maternal Gender Essentialism</i> mindset is based on the assumption that women and men have innate, inborn and fixed differences that make them suited to different types of caregiving and work.</p> <p>The <i>Passive Development (Sponge)</i> mindset assumes that children develop through a passive process of observing and taking in language, values and behaviour from those around them.</p>	<p><i>Maternal Gender Essentialism</i> is present and dominant among all groups.</p> <p><i>Passive Development (Sponge)</i> is present among all groups, but less dominant among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (focus on role models).</p>	<p>Avoid focusing exclusively on the role of mothers in caretaking. Instead, talk about the ways in which caregivers, including fathers, families and others, can and should be supported.</p> <p>Explain learning as active processes in which children respond to experiences and development is a contingent process to overcome naturalistic thinking.</p>

Table 1: Challenges in public thinking,* continued

Challenge	Mindsets that underlie this challenge	Demographic similarities and differences	Strategies for navigating this challenge
Challenge #3: Mindsets that obscure inequities reduce support for policies designed to address them.	<p>The <i>Interpersonal Racism</i> mindset assumes that racism is about individual biases, stereotypes and prejudices, rather than about systemic injustices.</p>	<p><i>Interpersonal Racism</i> mindset is present among all groups, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants connected it with <i>Structural Racism</i>.</p>	<p>Describe how historical injustices – through policymaking and institutions – have led to current inequities.</p> <p>Show how policy and reform address past and present inequities to better support all children and families across Australia.</p>
	<p>The <i>Racial Progress</i> mindset views racism as something that has been addressed through laws, policies and general progress and is no longer a problem.</p>	<p><i>Racial Progress, Otherism, and Pathologising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture</i> mindsets are present among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants, both non-CALD and CALD.</p>	
	<p>The <i>Otherism</i> mindset assumes that there are ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups’ in society that are fundamentally different from and at odds with each other.</p>		
	<p>The <i>Pathologising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture</i> mindset is based on the dangerous assumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities share a culture and a set of values that are inferior to that of ‘mainstream’ (i.e., white) Australian culture. It is a fundamentally racist mindset and one that is vital to shift.</p>		
Challenge #4: Fatalistic thinking makes it hard to see what <i>can</i> be changed to better support children and families.	<p>The <i>Threat of Modernity</i> mindset assumes that the modern world has become dangerous and that this threatens positive development and child wellbeing.</p>	<p><i>Threat of Modernity</i> is present among all groups but used in different ways by different groups.</p>	<p>Provide examples of concrete and clear solutions – showing places where they are being implemented and changes they are creating – to help overcome fatalistic thinking.</p> <p>Acknowledge the past and present harms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have experienced while emphasising the power of culturally appropriate and responsive government services to begin to address intergenerational trauma.</p>
	<p>The <i>Government as Interference</i> mindset assumes that the government interferes with parenting and early development.</p>	<p><i>Government as Interference</i> is present among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (non-CALD and CALD).</p>	
	<p>The <i>Government as Threat</i> mindset sees the government as actively threatening children and families.</p>	<p><i>Government as Threat</i> is present among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.</p>	

*The identification of mindsets and the noted similarities and differences among groups were derived using qualitative analysis of the total sample of participants in the focus groups.

Table 2: Opportunities in public thinking*

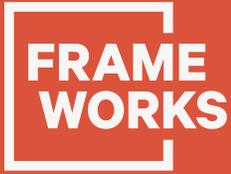
Opportunity	Mindsets that underlie the opportunity	Demographic similarities and differences	Strategies for leveraging the opportunity
Opportunity #1: People can sometimes see supporting children and families as a <i>collective</i> responsibility.	The <i>It Takes a Village</i> mindset assumes that how a child does in life is shaped by a network of actors in a community and that the responsibility for children's outcomes is shared.	<i>It Takes a Village</i> is dominant among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and found among CALD participants. Did not emerge among non-CALD participants.	Tell stories about and highlight the role of communities in early childhood to activate the <i>It Takes a Village</i> mindset about shared responsibility and overcome the tendency to blame, shame and stigmatise parents (specifically mothers). When talking about the role of community in children's lives, keep in mind cultural differences in understandings of what community means.
Opportunity #2: People can see that racism is built into systems, but this thinking needs strong and explicit cueing for some groups.	The <i>Structural Racism</i> mindset recognises that the way that laws, rules, policies and society are set up can create racial disparities. The <i>Financial Constraints</i> mindset recognises that family financial constraints can affect access to opportunities and shape a child's development.	<i>Structural Racism</i> and <i>Financial Constraints</i> are found among all groups, but more dominant among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.	Describe specific ways that structural inequities shape child development outcomes to expand understanding of how this works. Explain the ways that children and families can be better supported to overcome fatalistic thinking.
Opportunity #3: People can sometimes see that government is responsible for supporting children and families, but they need to be shown that it's <i>possible</i> for government to act as a partner.	The <i>Government as Partner</i> mindset that recognises government can and should play a role in supporting children's development and wellbeing.	<i>Government as Partner</i> is recessive among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (<i>Government as Interference</i> was more dominant). Did not emerge among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants (<i>Government as Threat</i> was dominant).	Talk about the ways government is responsible for supporting child development by working with families and communities.

*The identification of mindsets and the noted similarities and differences among groups were derived using qualitative analysis of the total sample of participants in the focus groups.

Table 3: Key similarities and differences across demographic groups*

Similarities	How this thinking is shared
<p>Naturalistic mindsets about child development and parenting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Passive Development (Sponge)</i> ▪ <i>Maternal Gender Essentialism</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Passive Development</i> is shared among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (both CALD and non-CALD) and present among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. ▪ <i>Maternal Gender Essentialism</i> is shared among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (CALD and non-CALD) and among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.
<p>Thinking about threats to child development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Threat of Modernity</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shared among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (CALD and non-CALD) and among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants, although employed differently to think about culture and community in the latter sessions.
Differences	How this thinking is different
<p>Thinking about what shapes child development and responsibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individualistic (<i>Family Bubble</i>) ▪ Collectivist (<i>It Takes a Village</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individualistic thinking is dominant among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (CALD and non-CALD) and recessive among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants. ▪ Collectivist thinking is dominant among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants and recessive among CALD participants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thinking about racial inequities in child development outcomes: ▪ Individualistic (<i>Interpersonal Racism, Racial Progress</i>) ▪ Explicitly racist (<i>Otherism, Pathologising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture</i>) ▪ Collectivist (<i>Structural Racism</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Individualistic mindsets are dominant among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (CALD and non-CALD). ▪ Explicitly racist mindsets are present (but not dominant) among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (CALD and non-CALD). ▪ Collectivist mindset is dominant among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.
<p>Thinking about the role of government:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Government as Interference</i> ▪ <i>Government as Threat</i> ▪ <i>Government as Partner</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Government as Interference</i> is present among non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander participants (CALD and non-CALD) and <i>Government as Partner</i> is recessive. ▪ <i>Government as Threat</i> is dominant among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

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