

the FrontProject

The early years springboard



The Front Project
and systems change



At the Front Project, we navigate all levels of our rich and complex early childhood education and care (ECEC) system to positively impact the experiences and improve the outcomes of children.

Since we believe that it is impossible for just one organisation or individual to be able to hold all of the perspectives and ‘moving parts’ of a system at the same time, we work with the whole ECEC system – both people inside the sector and those who intersect with it – to influence change across all levels.

This approach is called **systems change**.

This document provides an overview of how the Front Project (TFP) has conceptualised and currently works to achieve systems change in Australian ECEC.

It draws on work of leading international organisations and expertise that our founding CEO, Jane Hunt, developed at Harvard University and the [Schwab Foundation of Entrepreneurship](#).

Our motivation to change the system

One in five Australian children are not ready for school when they start and these numbers are four times higher for children who experience disadvantage or vulnerability. As a nation, we need to initiate a shift in the early learning system to improve this situation.

A complex social problem

TFP views the current levels of developmental vulnerability experienced by children in Australia as a complex social problem. This is because there is no simple solution to the issue, and it is possible to approach the issue from multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives, which may have multiple possible solutions.

Creating systemic change

TFP draws on the development and practice of systems thinking for social change.

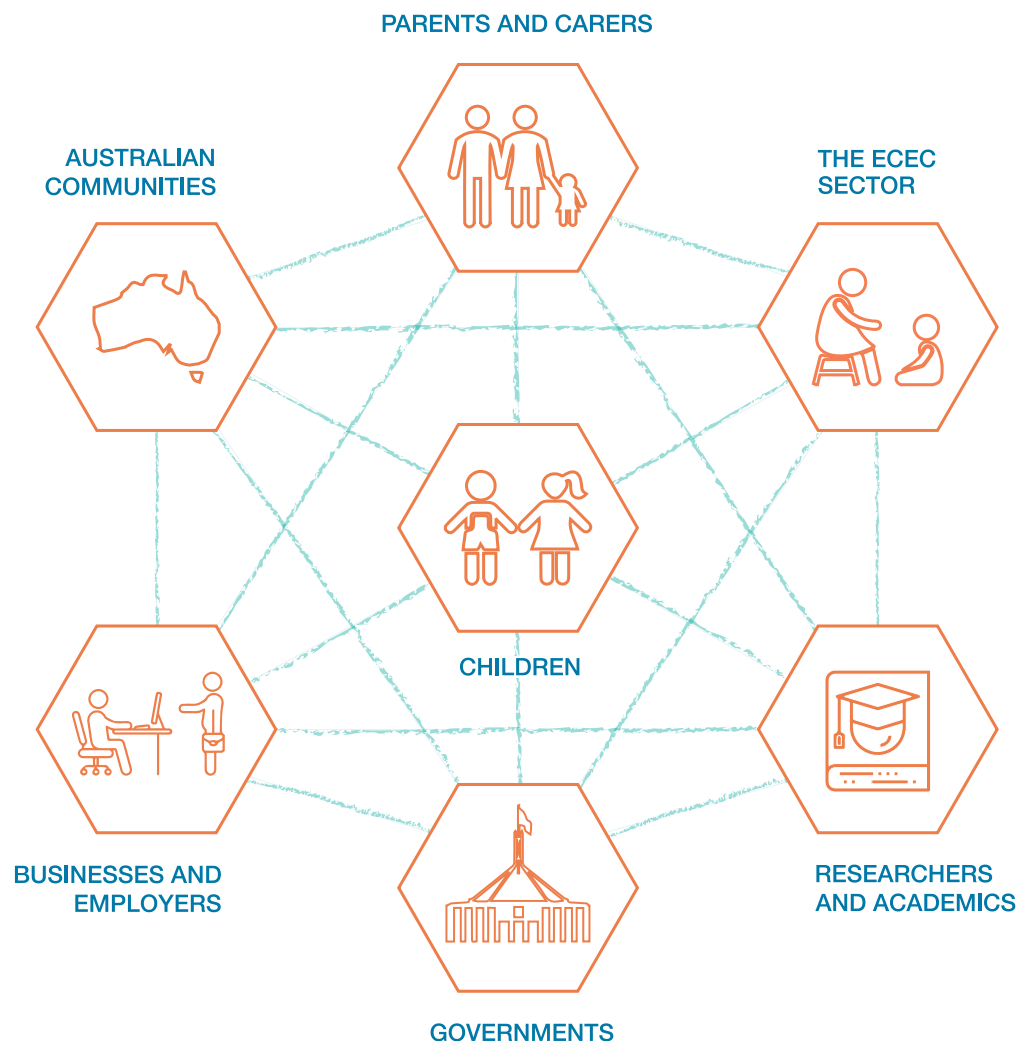
Systems thinking for social change is about addressing the root causes of social problems, which are often intractable and embedded in networks of cause and effect. It is an intentional process designed to fundamentally alter the components and structures that cause the system to behave in a certain way.

TFP has intentionally integrated into our systems change approach initiatives that also meet pressing needs in the system that are not being addressed elsewhere. One example of this is our Future Tracks initiative which aims to improve workforce quality and address shortages.

What is a system?

Systems are made up of any number of parts that have different kinds of connections, behaviours and dependencies. The diagram below shows some of the main parts that contribute to Australia's ECEC system. These might look different depending on how many levels you focus on within the system at one time and their connections are always subject to changes.

■ **Figure 1. Example of a system**



The Front Project's role in the ECEC system

The Front Project creates impact by being both an actor or stakeholder in the ECEC system, as well as an *intermediary*.

This allows TFP to fill two distinct and at times overlapping roles – to directly fill ‘gaps’ in the sector (for example, [upskilling the workforce](#)) and to build and develop the sector as a whole.

Understanding actors and intermediaries

System actors are more commonly referred to as ‘stakeholders’. They are individual people or organisations that have an interest, concern or direct connection with the system. When systems work well, they balance the different needs of actors and continually adjust how actors are prioritised in response to changes effecting the system.

System intermediaries are individual people or organisations that amplify the efforts of others. Hussein, Plummer and Breen (2018) suggest there are four types of intermediaries and of these, the one that best describes TFP's role is ‘field catalyst’:

- **Field catalyst:** deploys capabilities, quietly influencing and augmenting the field's efforts to achieve population-level change.
- **Capability specialist:** develops and enhances the capabilities of the stakeholders in the system.
- **Evidence-Action Lab:** focuses on research and development, advises policymakers, and helps the sector's practitioners learn, improve and scale solutions.
- **Place-based ‘backbone’:** coordinates local and regional cross-sector stakeholders and supports them to collectively transform a geographical area.



The Front Project as an actor and an intermediary

TFP as *an actor or stakeholder* in ECEC

How we work as an actor:

- We focus on impacting a sub-group of the population.
- We directly deliver programs or activities and provide advice.
- We build foundations for growth and to sustain activities.
- Our approach to leadership is about being visible and noticed to increase credibility and influence.
- We see and listen to the market to grow our programs.
- Our way of working involves diagnosis, analysis and responsiveness.
- We focus on cooperation and partnerships.
- We offer 'short-term', quicker change.
- We own attribution.

Examples of activities:

- Future Tracks upskill program.
- Future Tracks online community of practitioners.
- TFP-led advocacy, particularly directly working with government.
- Policy and research that is TFP-initiated and did not come from the 'field', for example, [Optimising the CCS](#) and [A smart investment for a smarter Australia](#).

TFP as *an intermediary or field catalyst* in ECEC

How we work as an intermediary:

- Our focus is on population-level change.
- We support and influence the actions of others.
- We build to achieve change, not to last.
- Our approach to leadership and influencing others is often 'invisible'.
- We see and listen to the whole system and act on behalf of the whole.
- Our way of working involves enquiry, diagnosis, responsiveness and iteration.
- We focus on collaboration and being flexible and iterative.
- We seek long-term change for greater impact.
- We see attribution being shared or owned by others.

Examples of activities

- The [Apiary](#).
- Convening across the sector to tackle common issues.
- Policy and research that stakeholders in the sector identify as needed to create change, for example, TFP is delivering an evaluation of 3-year-old kinder in Victoria with the University of Melbourne.

Opportunities and challenges of dual roles in systems change

There are a number of implications for TFP, or any organisation, acting in these two different capacities, including the breadth of capabilities and ways of working required.

Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organisations can focus on creating change in both the short and long term.• Can demonstrate impact to stakeholders and supporters who value 'quick change'.• Organisations have the agility to respond to short-term change that contributes to a long-term change agenda.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can create confusion among stakeholders about the role of an organisation.• It can cause confusion within collaborations whether an individual represents their organisation or the collaboration. This is particularly the case with advocacy.• Stakeholders may see and experience an organisation or collaboration through one activity, without understanding the true breadth.• Can be seen as a competitor rather than a collaborator.

Opportunities for change

Australia's early learning system is remarkably robust, but it is at a critical juncture. There is a convergence of opportunities to:

- improve the quality of early learning for all children
- assist families to access quality early learning to take up more employment opportunities and achieve greater wellbeing and financial stability
- advance our ability to address experiences of disadvantage and vulnerability through increased participation in quality early learning.

Our current system is delivering positive outcomes for many children and their families, but it's true potential is being held back by mindsets, government policies, funding models, complex operations and changing family and community needs. These are some of the parts of our ECEC system where the Front Project looks for opportunities to change and measure outcomes.

When we are successful, the entire system will shift towards its true capability and every child, family, workplace and community across Australia will benefit.

References

Hussein T, Plummer M & Breen, B. (2018). 'How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change'. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Accessed 24 June 2021. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/field_catalysts#

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We are an independent national enterprise working to create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

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