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### **Submission for Supporting Australian Stories on our Screens**

Thank you for the opportunity to express support for Australian content obligations - including those that apply to stories and programs produced for children - be preserved in a modern, multi-platform environment. This submission from Telethon Kids Institute will focus on research findings from studies that have investigated the place and impact of screen media on children across Australia.

Much of the research on screen and television usage by Australian children focuses on screen time rather than the quality of programs viewed. However, "parents reported that the average number of hours that Australian preschool-aged children use screen-based devices varied from 14 hours per week for infants and toddlers to 26 hours per week for two to five-year-olds" (Zabariero, Mantilla, Edwards, Danby, & Straker, 2019, p.15). This finding is relevant to the current review when set against the prescribed minimum duration of high-quality preschool for Australian four-year-olds under the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, which is only 15 hours per week. The average hours of screen time for four-year-olds significantly exceeds the minimum hours of preschool. This indicates that mechanisms to ensure high quality program content for children's consumption – regardless of the delivery platform – are at least as important as efforts to ensure preschool program quality.

It should be noted that guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that screen time for children over the age of two years be limited to one hour per day and only be used to view high-quality programs (Wrobel, Cross, Monks, Barnes, & George, 2019). While the findings of Zabariero et.al (2019) indicate that this recommended time-limit is exceeded for many Australian children, some comfort can be drawn from other research which found that 83 per cent of Australian parents have rules or restrictions in place relating to their child's viewing (ACMA, 2017). In relation to screen content, earlier research by ACMA (2015) found that parents rely on channel selection, time of day and program type when determining the suitability of content for their children, but find it increasingly difficult to monitor the content their children view as the number of devices and platforms rapidly increases (ACMA 2017). This points to the need for regulatory oversight of program content and quality to support parents in their efforts to protect their children from the harmful impact of exposure to violent or other inappropriate content such as junk food advertising (Wrobel et al., 2019).



US pioneer of children's television, Fred Rogers (*Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood* and *Children's Corner*) recognised the potential of television to serve the needs of children in the 1950s and based his approach to television programming on studies of child development at the University of Pittsburgh. He was deliberate in his use of the 'screen' to foster children's healthy growth, especially in areas of social-emotional development (Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media, 2012).

One recent example of the potential benefits of a well-designed multi-platform program for Australian children is the *Little J & Big Cuz* program which was initiated through the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) and further supported by complementary educational resources, also developed by the ACTF. The television program is a contemporary children's animation series with Indigenous lead characters and perspectives. While the series was designed for an Indigenous children's audience, the National Indigenous Television Channel reports that the series also provided valuable insights into Indigenous culture for non-Indigenous children (NITV, 2018). A study conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research found that the combined experience of viewing the *Little J & Big Cuz* program and engaging in follow-up activities designed for young children in preschool contributed to smooth and positive transition to school for Indigenous children (Moyle, 2019).

More examples of combining high quality Australian content with well-designed educational resources that are based on the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum and delivered across a variety of multi-media platforms, such as the resources produced by the ACTF, are likely to be of value and warrant further research.

Several years ago, Screen Australia (2013) found that most children just want to watch 'good shows', regardless of the country of origin. But when asked to nominate their favourite shows, Australian titles featured prominently because they enjoy the uniquely Australian content, characters and places that feature in those programs. The most commonly stated reasons children aged 8–14 gave for enjoying Australian content were: *I like seeing places I recognise.*; *"I like characters or people that remind me of myself or my friends"*; and *"I like stories that I think might happen to me or my friends"*. (Screen Australia, 2013).

In summary, there is strong research evidence that widespread access to high quality Australian broadcast content is beneficial for Australian children. Further, that parents rely on wise programming choices made by broadcasters to assist them to select content that is (at least) safe for their children and (at best) engaging, intellectually stimulating, and reassuring in this uncertain world. There is a clear place for the Australian Government to exercise its authority to require that online streaming services that distribute curated or commissioned video content to Australian children adhere to Australian content obligations and further improve the quality of children's viewing options.

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Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Jonathan Carapetis'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Jonathan' written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name 'Carapetis'.

**Professor Jonathan Carapetis**  
Executive Director, Telethon Kids Institute