



**Embrace**

TELETHON  
**KIDS**  
INSTITUTE

# Embrace 2022

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## Our research strategy

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### **Acknowledgement of Country**

Telethon Kids Institute acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters of Australia. We also acknowledge the Nyoongar Wadjuk, Yawuru, Kariyarra and Kurna Elders, their people and their land upon which the Institute is located and seek their wisdom in our work to improve the health and development of all children.

## Foreword



### Embrace Co-Directors Professor Helen Milroy and Professor Ashleigh Lin:

Improving the mental health of children and young people is a priority across Australia and within WA.<sup>1</sup>

The need for change in how child and youth mental health services are designed and delivered, and for a better understanding of mental health and ill-health, is well-established. It is also urgent: the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the issues that were already being experienced by children and young people and has compounded the pressure felt by mental health services.

While the challenges concerning the mental health of children and young people are significant, the evidence base to transform our understanding and our services is less well-developed. That's where Embrace comes in.

This strategy positions Embrace as part of the solution to some of the most pressing challenges facing the youth of Western Australia and the mental health services working to support them. We know that resolving these challenges will only be possible by working meaningfully with children, young people, and their families, which is why this strategy is primarily based on what they told us is most important to them.

We thank the young people, parents, carers, communities, and clinicians who have worked with us to decide on the research that they want to see happen. We thank our colleagues and Embrace partners for their contribution to this strategy and their collaboration with us so far. We look forward to working together with everyone who wants to achieve mentally healthy futures for all infants, children, adolescents, and young people in WA.

<sup>1</sup> Government of Western Australia Mental Health Commission (2020) *Young People's Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drug Use: Priorities for Action 2020-2025*. Available from: [www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/3489/yppa-young-people-priorities-for-action.pdf](http://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/3489/yppa-young-people-priorities-for-action.pdf)

## Introduction

Embrace is Western Australia's first research collaboration devoted to the mental health of children and young people aged 0-25 years. Based at Telethon Kids Institute, Embrace works closely with researchers, service providers and other organisations in WA.

Embrace was launched in 2019 and has supported research both inside and outside the Institute. Outside of the Institute, Embrace provides an important point of contact and is a trusted partner for organisations and individuals interested in infant, child, and adolescent mental health research. Within the Institute, Embrace sought to bring together researchers interested in mental health research and create momentum for future work.

An impressive range of collaborations, partnerships and funding followed as a result.

Building on this promising foundation, in 2021 Embrace secured dedicated funding from the global mining group Rio Tinto to further its work in mental health research and consolidate its mission. This strategy document represents an exciting shift in approach for Embrace, with activity determined by community-led research priorities and informed by previous successes. This strategy will establish Embrace as an investor in people and projects of importance to the community, as an attractive partner in research and in decision-making, and as the strategic unit for mental health research within the Institute and across the wider research landscape.



# Embrace's work so far





## Embrace's work so far

Since being launched in 2019, Embrace has made the most of the opportunities for collaboration within its broad remit. As of mid-2022, Embrace has helped to leverage over \$11 million in successful funding applications. The Embrace team have facilitated research in a variety of research areas, from suicide prevention to digital mental health interventions and the wellbeing of young people with chronic conditions.

Importantly, Embrace has been instrumental in building childhood trauma research within Telethon Kids Institute. Led by Embrace Co-Director Professor Helen Milroy, this work has grown into a significant and nationally recognised program that provides ground-breaking insight into the relationship between childhood trauma and mental health.

Embrace has also established invaluable reference groups of parents/carers and young people, built a network of partner organisations, and awarded funds to outstanding infant, child, adolescent, and youth mental health researchers. Its contribution to steering committees, consultations and conferences has expanded the profile of mental health research and created new opportunities for collaboration.



The background is a solid purple color. On the left side, there are several large, overlapping, light green curved shapes that resemble a stylized 'C' or a series of concentric arcs. In the upper right quadrant, there is a light green rounded rectangle. In the center, there is a small, solid yellow circle.

# **Embrace's future: principles, priorities, and community relationships**



**Embrace's  
future:  
principles,  
priorities, and  
community  
relationships**

To date, Embrace has made the most of opportunities across a broad range of activities and project areas. In lieu of dedicated funding to establish its own mission, Embrace has positioned itself as a keen collaborator across the considerable breadth of infant, child, adolescent, and youth mental health research being conducted within the Institute and by stakeholder organisations.

The investment made by Embrace Principal Partner Rio Tinto will allow Embrace to have a more considered, impactful approach to its work. The activity of Embrace will be guided by principles and designed to align with community-led research priorities. Embrace will therefore stimulate work in areas of importance to the community, providing support and welcoming collaboration according to its research priorities.





# Principles



The principles are drawn from the broad aims that Embrace has worked towards since its inception. These principles are already part of Embrace's purpose and will continue to underpin its work as Embrace shifts towards a more strategic and priority-focused approach.

## Embrace is:

1

### Inclusive of all development stages

Embrace works across infancy, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (0-25 years) to identify the origins of mental health difficulties, develop new interventions, and facilitate the effective translation of findings into clinical practice and policy.

2

### Focused on 'early in life, early in illness'

Half of all mental illness begins before the age of 14 and most cases go undetected or untreated. 75% of people who experience mental illness develop symptoms before they turn 25.<sup>2</sup> In Western Australia alone, suicide is the leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24 years.<sup>3</sup>

A focus on the timely detection of mental health issues, and readily available appropriate support, is vital to improve the mental health and wellbeing of infants, children, and young people. Embrace works to advance our understanding of mental health and wellbeing with a focus on addressing mental health issues early in life and early in illness.

3

### Working with communities to improve mental health outcomes within WA

While WA has similarities compared to other states within Australia, it is distinct in terms of social context and geography. Embrace is based in WA and understands that the state faces unique challenges compared to those experienced elsewhere in the country, including those related to the mental health of its infants, children, adolescents, and young people.

Embrace is primarily focused on improving mental health outcomes within WA and on working collaboratively with young people, parents, carers, communities, and other organisations. Embrace welcomes collaboration beyond WA to help to tackle challenges faced across state and national borders but works first and foremost within the state and for the benefit of WA infants, children, adolescents, and young people.

<sup>2</sup> Kessler, R. C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., Jin, R., Merikangas, K. R., & Walters, E. E. (2005). *Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication*. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 62(6), 593-602. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020). *Causes of death, Australia*. Available from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/2019>



# Priorities



The priorities of Embrace are primarily based on the findings of a community priority setting project conducted by the Embrace team and colleagues across the Institute. The project report, *Identifying the Priorities for Future Child and Youth Mental Health Research in Western Australia*, provides more information on objectives, methods and findings and is available on the Embrace website.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, this work aimed to identify mental health research priorities for infants, children and young people in WA and consulted with: young people aged 14 to 25 years with lived experience of mental health concerns; parents and carers of children and young people with mental health concerns; and professionals who support the mental health concerns of infants, children and young people.

The research team conducted a survey with young people, parents, carers, and professionals. This survey received responses from almost

700 individuals, which were used to inform a list of potential research questions. The questions were then reviewed to determine if they had already been addressed by existing literature. Unaddressed questions were ranked by respondents to produce the 'top 20' most important research questions. As a final activity, a workshop was held to rank this 'top 20' list of research questions according to importance. These are the community-led research priorities.

The 'top 10' most important research questions were analysed alongside insights from external stakeholder strategies and discussions with Institute researchers. Three themes were identified in common across these sources of information, though they primarily align with the community-led research priorities. These three themes are now the research priorities for Embrace and will guide the activities of Embrace from 2022.

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<sup>4</sup>Freeman, J., Conway, R., Brown, G., Rao, P., Padmanabhan, V., McIlroy, C., Frank, B., McKenzie, A., Milroy, H., Lin, A., (2022) *Identifying the Priorities for Future Child and Youth Mental Health Research in Western Australia*. Telethon Kids Institute, Perth, Australia

# Priority

## 1

### Work to improve access to child and youth mental health support

This research priority seeks to improve access to mental health support, both clinical and non-clinical, to improve mental health outcomes for infants, children, adolescents, and young people. Topics such as models of care and quality improvement are part of this theme, as well as non-clinical community-based services including peer support, play groups, arts programs, and online social support.

This priority is informed by the community-led research priorities concerning the removal of barriers to care, the assessment of regional service needs and non-clinical community-based services. This priority is also linked to work at a national and state level which argues for system-wide reform in the provision of mental health services; for example, the *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*,<sup>5</sup> the Government of Western Australia Ministerial Taskforce report into public mental health services for infants, children, and adolescents,<sup>6</sup> and the Western Australian Association for Mental Health (WAAMH) *Youth Services Integration Report 2019*.<sup>7</sup>

By making accessibility a priority of its work, Embrace will provide a valuable evidence base for organisations, healthcare service providers and policy makers tasked with the necessary and complex matter of making services more accessible to improve outcomes for infants, children, adolescents, and young people.

<sup>5</sup> National Mental Health Commission (2021) *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*. Available from: [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/5b7112be-402-4b23-919d-8fb9b6027506/National-Children's-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy---Report#:~:text=The%20National%20Children's%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20Strategy%20\(the%20Strategy,wellbeing%20of%20children%20and%20families](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/5b7112be-402-4b23-919d-8fb9b6027506/National-Children's-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Strategy---Report#:~:text=The%20National%20Children's%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20Strategy%20(the%20Strategy,wellbeing%20of%20children%20and%20families)

<sup>6</sup> Government of Western Australia Ministerial Taskforce (2022) *Final Report – Ministerial Taskforce into Public Mental Health Services for Infants, Children and Adolescents aged 0-18 years in WA*. Not available online.

<sup>7</sup> Western Australian Association for Mental Health (2019) *Youth Services Integration Report 2019: Navigating a Fragmented System*. Available from: <https://waamh.org.au/sector-development-and-training/youth-services-integration-project>

## Priority 2

### Investigate the complex relationships between child and youth mental health and other factors

This research priority aims to investigate the relationship between mental health and other factors; research questions that are more 'complex' than those which focus on one topic alone. These other factors could be co-occurring mental health concerns, physical ill health, contextual factors or characteristics of individuals and communities.

This priority is informed by community-led research priorities that question the relationship between neurodiversity and mental health, that ask how to better support the mental wellbeing of neurodiverse young people that identify as belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community and that investigate the effects of children and young people receiving multiple mental health diagnoses over time.

Research on childhood trauma is also captured by this priority, as trauma is a broad term that captures many different experiences felt by individuals and by communities. The experience and impact of trauma is influenced by numerous factors and characteristics. The population of infants, children and young people who have experienced trauma is characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity. As such, complexity is inherent to research on childhood trauma and mental health.

By making complexity a priority of its work, Embrace will push mental health research beyond the discrete and abstract. Mental health research will be situated in the conditions, context, and characteristics of those which experience mental ill health, augmenting the ability of such research to be translated into preventative and supportive measures.

## Priority 3

### Support the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people

'How can the perspectives of Aboriginal people be ensured in developing mental health research and practice?'. This is the research question concluded to be the 'most important' by the community priority setting project, and it directly aligns with this research priority.

The mental health of Aboriginal children and young people should be considered in a holistic context; health is constituted by mental, physical, cultural, and spiritual health. These factors are interrelated and are a source of strength for Aboriginal people and communities who face the continued impacts of colonisation. When these factors are disturbed, however, ill health will persist.<sup>8</sup>

The need for culturally safe, accessible, and effective mental health and wellbeing support for Aboriginal people is demonstrated by the evidence: within WA, Aboriginal people experience higher levels of psychological distress and have higher rates of death due to suicide compared to non-Aboriginal people.<sup>9</sup> These trends are replicated across Australia.<sup>10</sup>

Embrace will build capacity in Telethon Kids Institute, providing support for the recruitment and development of Aboriginal researchers within the field of mental health and wellbeing. Embrace will also work with teams to build understanding on how best to support the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people within WA, and how to address mental health concerns most effectively when they arise. And most importantly, Embrace will work with communities to ensure strong Aboriginal governance and equal participation in research.

In all its activity, Embrace will adhere to the *Guidelines for the Standards for the Conduct of Aboriginal Health Research* published by the Telethon Kids Institute Kulunga Aboriginal Unit.

<sup>8</sup> Dudgeon, P., Milroy, H., Walker, R. (2014) *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice*. Second edition.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2017 report: Western Australia*. Cat. no. IHW 185. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2020 summary report*. Cat. no. IHPF 2. Canberra: AIHW.



# Community Relationships

This strategy is guided first and foremost by the community. Embrace is grateful to the young people and parents/carers who communicated to us the research that they want to see happen. Beyond this document, Embrace is committed to developing its relationship with its reference groups of parents/carers and young people, and to centring their voice in future activities.

Since its launch, the work of Embrace has also benefitted from developing constructive relationships with a number of partner organisations across the field of mental health and wellbeing. More recently, the work of Embrace and the development of this strategy has been made possible by funding provided by the Principal Partner organisation Rio Tinto.

As part of this strategy, Embrace will strengthen its partner network and look for further opportunities to work together towards its overarching vision: mentally healthy futures for all infants, children, adolescents, and young people in WA.

Embrace welcomes interest from individuals who would like to shape our research and join the Embrace reference groups of young people and parents/carers. Embrace is also keen to hear from organisations who share our vision and would like to become a partner in our work.

If you or your organisation are interested in these opportunities, please contact Embrace via the contact details on the website. We look forward to hearing from you.



