



“Our future as Australians is for us to live together with respect. Our people don't want to live in the past, we want the past to live in us. We want our kids to be part of a vibrant future with their culture and identity intact. We know as Aboriginal people that this foundation provides us what we need to engage as equals, empowered and with choice over our future. The governance systems imposed on our people over the 240 years has hurt us, but it has not broken our spirit and we continue to follow our laws, search to revive and strengthen our identities and to deliver the best for our people.”

– William Tilmouth, Children's Ground Chairperson

Children's Ground Quarterly Report: Q1 2021

Sharing our growth, reach and impact over time

Why is Children's Ground so important?

Because, at the time they are born, First Nations children are far more likely to die at birth, to be placed into out-of-home care, to live with a disability and ill-health, to be incarcerated as they grow older, to be unemployed, to be homeless, to live in poverty, to experience racism and to die younger than any other Australians.

The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) exists to evidence the empowerment of First Nations people to deliver solutions to the issues that have been thrust upon them since the invasion and colonisation of their country. Our First Nations leaders, Elders and communities are clear about the change they want to see – the next generation being culturally confident, proud and strong in their identity, and at the same time economically independent and empowered to make their choices in a global context.

Local empowerment is the single biggest driver for change and is integral to the CG Approach. People designing, delivering, evaluating and having control over their lives with high quality resources is fundamental to long term change.

Changing the future for our children

Over a generation Children's Ground is designed to make this a reality for First Nations communities. Our early evaluation evidence shows the beginnings of generational change taking root.

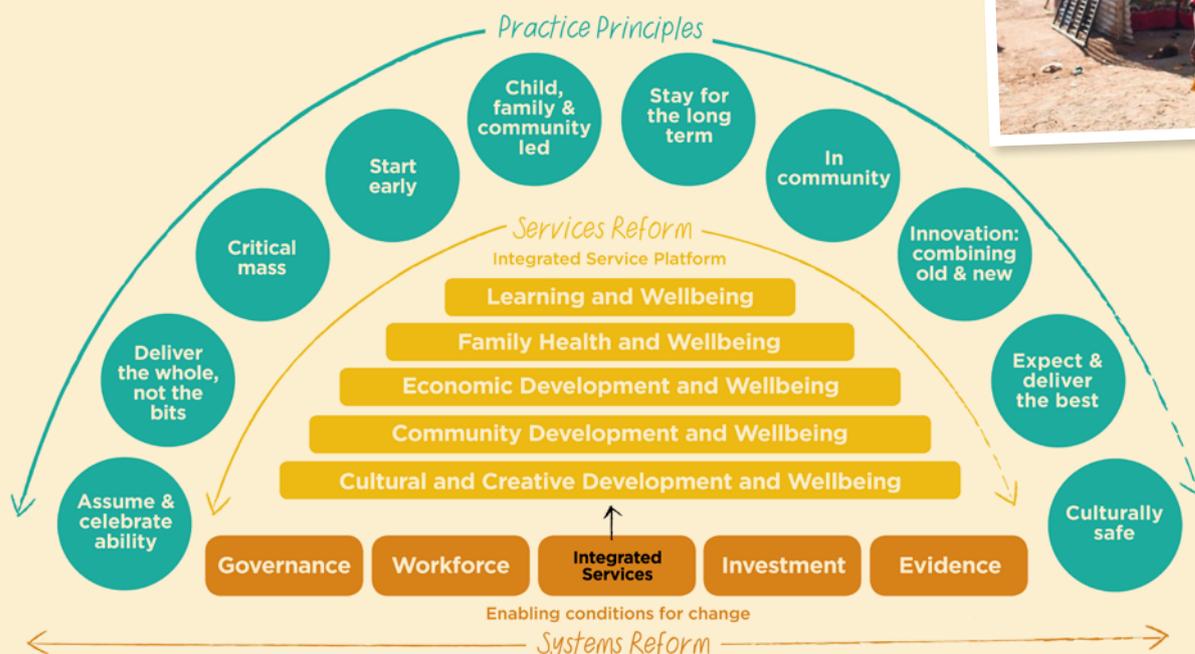
We are building the leading practice and evidence base for systemic change to achieve long term outcomes:

- Children enjoying quality, life long learning
- Children and families enjoying health and wellbeing
- Children and families experiencing safety
- Communities that freely celebrate culture and life
- Young people who feel hope, have pathways to employment and are confident in their identity
- Adults who have choice, a voice and inclusion to be economically independent.

If this is experienced across the whole community, future generations will have justice and equity.



The Children's Ground Approach



Progress: growth, reach and impact

The Children's Ground strategy is to support a discrete number of communities to implement the CG Approach fully over the 25-year period - to build the evidence base, scale over time and impact policy to significantly reform systems. The design of Children's Ground is to work in small community clusters where the CG Approach is adapted to each context and scaled for population size, remoteness and collaborative delivery with local service systems - this enables efficiency and effectiveness for economies of scale.

KPI Growth: Proportion of full CG Approach delivery

The CG Approach is currently operating and being evidenced in three regions - each is at a different stage of the 25-year Approach. As at quarter one 2021, the CG Approach was being delivered to the extent shown below.

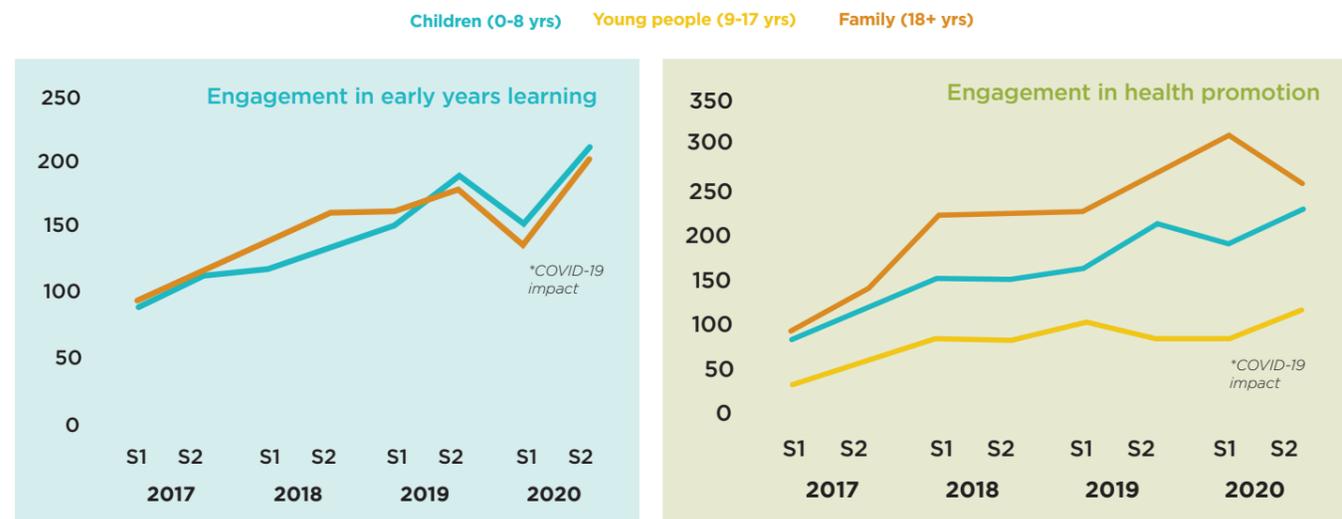


The CG Approach requires all key elements to be implemented fully to achieve long term change. Children's Ground is a developing organisation. It is expected to take a further 3-5 years to be fully operational in three regions, as funding resources are secured. These quarterly reports will present progress across key performance indicators (KPIs) and measures of the CG Approach.

How we are tracking against full implementation	85-100%	70-85%	50-70%	30-50%	< 50%	WTA
	CENTRAL AUSTRALIA		WEST ARNHEM		DARWIN	
Learning & Wellbeing	[Green]		[Yellow]		[Light Blue]	
Family Health & Wellbeing	[Green]		[Light Green]		[Light Blue]	
Economic Development & Wellbeing	[Red]		[Red]		[Light Blue]	
Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing	[Yellow]		[Green]		[Light Blue]	
Community Development & Wellbeing	[Red]		[Yellow]		[Light Blue]	

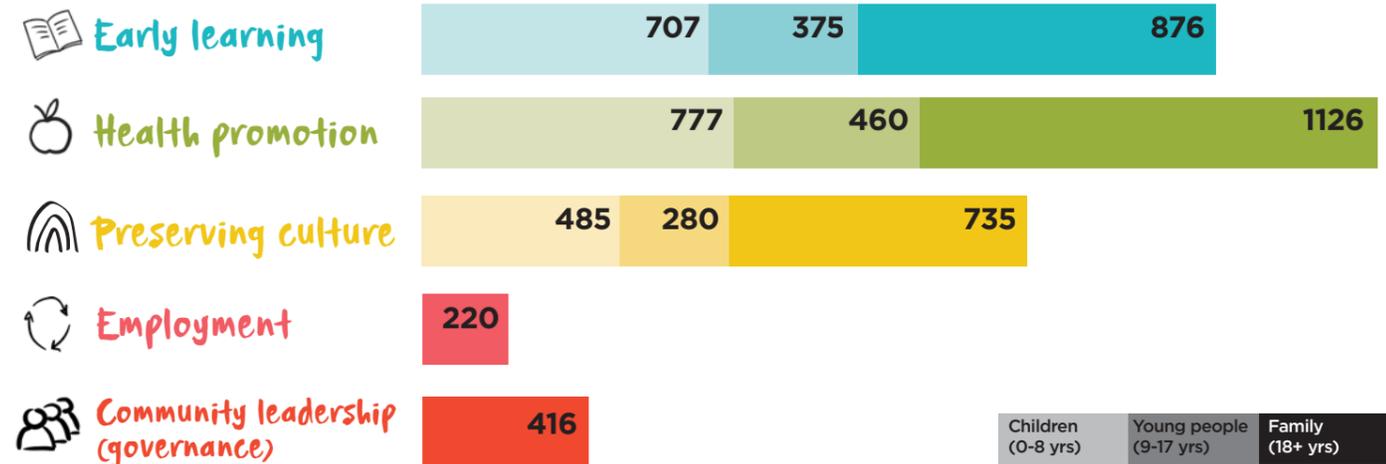
KPI: Access and engagement over time

Engagement with Children's Ground so far, from 2017 to 2020

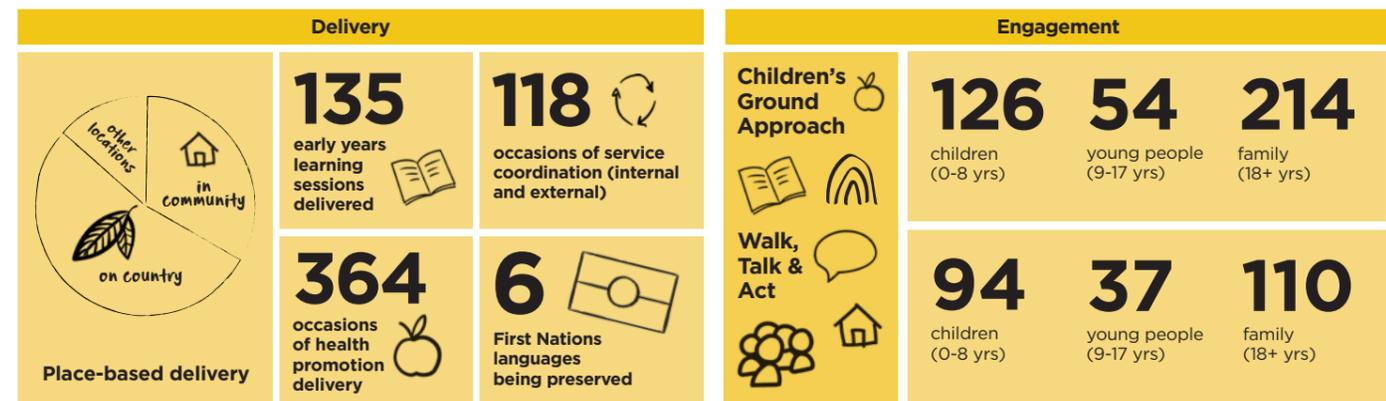


KPI: Reach over time

2389 people have engaged with Children's Ground from 2014 to 2021 across all regions



KPI: Quarter one 2021 access, delivery and engagement



Note: During Walk, Talk & Act, children and their families engage in early years learning sessions 1-2 days per week, as well as health promotion, governance and employment. These communities are awaiting funding to implement the full CG Approach.





How the year began

The year began with communities undertaking their planning for 2021. Some communities are at the beginning of their 25-year journey and others have been with us on their journey for the past four years. Everyone is recovering from the COVID-19 threats.

Our planning and training covered many areas. We begin each year with a focus on the history and impact of colonisation to understand deeply why things are the way they are, and our vision and strategy for change. We review the previous year and set benchmarks for the coming year. This year, we highlighted the themes of self-care, understanding trauma, improving quality and standards and implementing change management as the organisation grows.

One of the most important focuses was on Elders and how to ensure their knowledge is transferred across generations. They are the living libraries and universities of language and culture. Creating the space for the next generation to learn this knowledge is a priority for our cultural and professional practice at Children's Ground.

Loss and Grief

We have lost important senior people within the community this year. Early in the year, we mourned the passing of an incredibly important Arrernte woman and Elder of the Arrernte Nation with a history of unbroken connection to her Country. At her funeral, she was honoured by her family and the wider family of Children's Ground, which she helped design, found and build. At Children's Ground, her loss is deeply felt. To the Arrernte Nation, it is the passing of a most significant holder of knowledge and law.

Customary Law

Moving into the New Year is a significant period for customary men's law and ceremony in Central Australia. There were five significant law ceremonies held over four months involving families across Children's Ground. By Arrernte law, this requires the right people to lead and participate. This is one of the most significant cultural periods of the year and is recognised formally within Children's Ground.

Challenges

- Securing adequate financial investment to implement the full CG Approach
- Government funding programs are not designed for First Nations knowledge systems and solutions, creating exclusions from funding
- Passing of Elders who hold cultural leadership and knowledge
- Internal IT systems are immature and unable to meet the growing needs of the organisation

The individual unit cost of Children's Ground is approximately \$12,000 per person per year. By comparison, the cost of a school scholarship is in the order of \$50,000 per student per year. For the same investment at Children's Ground, an entire family benefits from and contributes to whole of community change. Investing the capital where children live shifts the future for a whole community.

We have a collective investment approach bringing together funding from Government (50%) and Philanthropy (50%).

CHILDREN'S GROUND FULL PROGRAM TARGET 2021-2023

Income/ Expenditure	2021	2022	2023
Total	\$8,241,229	\$12,898,583.62	\$15,927,483.53

The Children's Ground Approach in action

Learning and Wellbeing

'Start Early': Children's Ground principle.

In 2021, the Children's Ground culturally designed Early Childhood program kicked off in seven communities. Children were bursting with energy and loved their first term of learning both on country and in centre - with Cultural and Western-trained educators and surrounded by family. Rich, play-based learning is trauma informed. Learning environments are physically, emotionally and culturally safe. The children are engaged, bright and creative learners.

Highlight - Starting the School Year Strong:

We have been so excited to watch Early Years learning come to life at 15 Mile as part of our Walk, Talk & Act (community engagement and planning) in Darwin. Community leaders and young mothers share both their aspirations and worries for their children and are leading change. At Knuckey's Lagoon, local staff have been working to get every child engaged in school. In Minmarama, local staff started a breakfast program to support school engagement, ensuring children feeling healthy and energised for a day of learning.



Family Health and Wellbeing

Highlight - A Healthy Start to Life:

In Central Australia, our First Nations Maternal and Child Health Specialist Larissa has been successfully engaging with mothers and babies across communities in Central Australia. These communities designed a 'Little Ones' activity group in the front yard of family homes as there were many children under two not receiving any learning or health support. After Larissa began facilitating these targeted 'Little Ones' sessions at family homes, we saw a remarkable change in engagement. As an Arrernte language speaker, Larissa is able to communicate and engage with local families and infants on a deep level.

The health sessions delivered in people's homes became a pathway to regular early learning and health sessions at Children's Ground.



Impact: Children's Ground's Family Health and Wellbeing Framework takes health to where people live, responding to the lived reality for each community, empowering people through targeted and universal health promotion. Place-based delivery in local communities is an enabler for equitable service access and increases engagement of children and families.



Highlight - Learning and Health Hub On Country:

In Central Australia on Anapipe country at Burt Creek outstation, children and their families are loving their newly established community hub for learning and health. This intergenerational space comes alive with learning, health, culture, language, literacy and numeracy. It is a place children love. Families are excited, young adults are showing leadership and Elders are sharing knowledge. It is a place that is safe and celebrates our children and our community.

What is happening here?

- Early Years learning and health sessions four days a week
- Sessions in the hub and on Country
- Arrernte and Western literacy and numeracy, cultural knowledge and connection to Country.

Impact: For the first time, children at Burt Creek are experiencing a learning system designed for their culture and identity, on their remote Homelands, with access to education and health where they live.

Community Development and Wellbeing

Highlight - Living Permanently Back on Traditional Lands:

After decades of struggle, families have returned to live on their traditional lands at Marlkawo, West Arhem Land, where they had not lived permanently for over 20 years. Families who first established Children's Ground requested support to return to their Homelands and deliver the CG Approach in their community. It has taken three years of hard work to establish safe accommodation, communications, a Learning and Wellbeing Hub

and food security. During the wet season, the only way into this tiny community is by air. This year, families stayed all year round - through the wet and into the new year. The families have made their dream come true. They are connected back to their country, permanently - home.

"We need to stay here - this is our country... We need to teach the children more about these places...The next generation of TOs and djungkayi [caretakers]." - Shirley Djandjomerr, Traditional Owner, Marlkawo

Economic Development and Wellbeing

Highlight - Young Leaders:

We have seen increased employment of young people across data and evaluation, Early Years learning, health promotion, administration, support of Elders and men's and youth work. They all live in community and bring their experience and understanding into their work. Most have been at risk and are now growing in confidence, emerging as inspiring leaders and role models for the children.



Impact: These young leaders are working alongside their Elders and families in environments that value and remunerate their language and cultural knowledge. They are provided with the flexibility to grow their experience in work and leadership, while maintaining their cultural responsibilities. The flexibility of Children's Ground's employment model allows for time away from work to engage in cultural responsibilities like law and ceremony. We know these are important cultural experiences for young people and learning opportunities for young children, critical for First Nations social and emotional wellbeing.

Cultural Development and Wellbeing

Highlight - The Power of Elders:

In Central Australia, Elders lead fortnightly cultural mapping and Arrernte language workshops. These are critical for the protection, development and sustainability of First Language and culture. Elders are worried about weakening languages and cultural knowledge.

"We have to work hard to keep our languages alive and strong and used across generations. Elders are teaching the adults and young people, who in turn teach our kids. This is part of our cultural professional development."

We know that when our Elders pass, generations of knowledge pass with them. This is why these workshops are so critical: knowledge systems, stories and language must be preserved and transferred to future generations.



Impact: First Nations knowledge systems have been disrespected, undermined and damaged for 240 years. This brilliant integrated system of life, learning, law and economy is still alive. At Children's Ground, we actively work to strengthen and privilege this through the leadership of Elders and community.

Children face a range of barriers in mainstream education. Some relate to cultural and linguistic barriers; others relate to barriers that arise from socioeconomic stress resulting in health and emotional barriers. In mainstream education our kids are 'diagnosed' as problem learners with behavioural issues. They focus on the deficit of the child rather than knowing and understanding the child.

Children's Ground focuses on the strength and ability of children and creating the environment for learning and wellbeing that children will succeed in, engage in and love. This is highlighted in Susan's story - shared with permission by her parents.

Susan is a bright and curious nine-year-old girl who has grown up in a remote town in West Arnhem. A local service working with Susan recommended medication for 'hyperactivity' so she could focus better on her learning.

Susan was living in a community in overcrowded housing without access to her traditional lands. Susan's emotions and behaviour related to experiences in her life and the impact of intergenerational trauma experienced by many First Nations children, families and communities.

Susan's family wanted her to spend more time on Country surrounded by the love and care of her extended family. Susan's family wanted her to engage in on-Country learning to support her spirit and wellbeing.

Susan went to her Grandmother's Homeland, Marlkawo in West Arnhem Land. When Susan arrived, she had skin sores from living in crowded housing and showed signs of hypervigilance. Susan's family's aspirations were for her to spend time on Country for healing her physical and spiritual health. Susan's family also wanted her to engage in both cultural and Western learning: in both her First Language and English.

After living on Country with her grandmother for four weeks, Susan settled into her learning routine and her anxiety diminished. With the help of both traditional and Western medicines, Susan's skin sores are healing, she is calm and thriving in her learning.



During learning, Susan has been taught explicitly about brain function and the interaction between the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex. Susan engaged in activities to show the visual representation of the neurological activity within her brain during times of stress or worry.

Susan has been involved in a range of emotional regulation activities. This includes cultural activities on her Country as well as yoga and meditation sessions to maintain her focus, relax her body and calm her mind. Mindfulness strategies combined with timed brain breaks have ensured Susan is able to self-regulate during learning times with increased focus and attention to her learning. Susan's confidence as a learner has increased dramatically and she approaches her learning with curiosity and enthusiasm.

Susan thrives during cultural learning. As she grows, so too do her cultural responsibilities. Susan is being mentored and nurtured by her Grandmother to ensure she has strong cultural knowledge and understands her responsibilities to family and to Country. When on Country, Susan is calm and respectful to her ancestors and Elders.

All family members are actively engaged in Susan's care and learning. Susan's family members are her cultural educators and are working alongside Western-trained educators and health promotion practitioners so Susan can have agency over her own health and be a successful learner.

Over the past three years, Susan has spent short and long periods of time living at Marlkawo on her traditional lands, away from overcrowding and the stressors of daily life in towns. When Susan is living at Marlkawo, she is in a positive and safe environment, surrounded by her family and important cultural teachers. She is a healthy, engaged learner and emerging young leader.

Marlkawo is very remote. It is a 12-hour drive from Darwin and 3-hour drive from Maningrida. During the wet season, it is only accessible by air. Access to basic services and food security are major issues year-round. Children's Ground continues to support families to live at Marlkawo and to overcome the lack of access to basic services and support by working with families to lead and deliver education, health promotion (with supported access to clinical health) and employment.

In My Blood It Runs Documentary

Children's Ground is the key partner to this ground-breaking documentary, centred around the lived experience of Arrernte and Garrwa boy Dujan. Through his voice we learn about his experience in the education system where he is failing as well as the power of culture and family. His Grandmothers lead our work in Central Australia.

Our impact work with the film continues this quarter through partnership on associated advocacy campaigns including:

- **'Raise the Age'** campaign to stop First Nations children aged 10-13 years being incarcerated and raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years
- **'Learn our Truth'** campaign developed by The National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition that aims to engage mainstream schools in First Nations cultural safety
- **Utyerre Apanpe** (First Nations Educators' Network) who are developing a First Nations-led education system in Australia



Evidence-based practice: First Nations-led research and evaluation

A key strategic priority for Children's Ground is evidence based practice to inform systems and policy change nationally.

In this quarter, we introduced the new Children's Ground data collection app to our staff in West Arnhem and Darwin. In our three regions, all staff now use the app for their daily data collection. Our young First Nations staff are so proficient in with the app that they are now training their Elders in how to use it.

During this quarter we also continued our work with First Nations staff to finalise our first evaluation of the [CG Approach](#) in Central Australia. This report will be released in July. It is a baseline report evaluates our first three years of establishing and growing our Approach from both a Western and First Nations perspective.

"Aboriginal people have been researched to death. We want to research ourselves back to life."

- William Tilmouth, Chair of Children's Ground

National benchmarking of First Nations children and understanding First Nations people

2021 Australian Early Development Census National Conference - William Tilmouth Keynote Address

William Tilmouth, Chair of Children's Ground, delivered a keynote address at the 2021 Australian Early Development Census National Conference, 'Trends in Child Development - The Future of Australia'. Titled 'Empowering communities to create sustainable change', William spoke to a national audience of early childhood educators, researchers and policy makers. William stated that:

"My people don't desire to be second class citizens...nor deserve educational or economical failure, we deserve truth, economy and respect...a new generation seeks economic, cultural and political influence...closing the gap has been an abject failure and it is time together to disrupt the status quo..."

William challenged the audience to consider what genuine empowerment is and the structural racism that pervades our systems. He spoke of the complex Aboriginal systems of knowledge, governance and kinship that remain alive today across many nations. Feedback from attendees described William's address as inspiring and thought provoking.

William urges us to make changes in power structures to ensure First Nations voices and solutions are known and heard so we can achieve systemic reform.

'Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices)': Amplifying the voices of First Nations women and Promoting human rights

Children's Ground celebrated International Women's Day with an inspiring virtual conversation discussing the resilience, strength and intelligence of First Nations women. The stellar panel included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar AO, 2021 Senior Australian of the Year Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann and leading Gamilaroi/Gomeri journalist Brooke



Boney. The conversation focused on the seminal, ['Wiyi Yani U Thangani \(Women's Voices\)' Report](#), released by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2020: a powerful document that elevates the voices of First Nations women from across Australia.