



children's
ground

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe
Mparntwe

Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe: Children's Ground in Central Australia

Summary of key findings

2017 to 2019 | Baseline and early progress



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"Nurturing the relationship with the country nurtures families and communities. When you are on country you can feel the spirits of the land and the ancestors with you. We are communicating with them and they are our guardians."

M.K. Turner, OAM, Arrernte Professor, Elder and Law Woman, Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Director
Children's Ground

Acknowledgements

Children's Ground acknowledges the unceded sovereign lands of First Nations people. We pay our respects to ancestors, Elders, adults and young people, and the children who are our future. This report was created on the lands of the Arrernte nation.

Children's Ground gives particular recognition to:

M.K. Turner, Arrernte Elder, Cultural Professor and Law woman

Mrs. Palmer (dec.), Arrernte Elder, Cultural Professor and Law woman

Mrs. Abbot (dec.), Arrernte Elder, Cultural Professor and Law woman

Therese Ryder, Arrernte Elder, Cultural Professor and Law woman

Felicity Hayes, Traditional Owner, Mparntwe (Alice Springs)

This report is for the community and the First Nations leaders and families who were instrumental in designing, establishing, monitoring and developing Children's Ground. It is for policy and law makers, funders and those who want to learn more about First Nations people and systems design.

This report is the result of many years of history, commitment and unrelenting determination of Elders. We thank all of you. This report shows how far we have come and how far we have to go. Most important are the ampe akwekes – the children. We live and breathe for you. We do what we do for your future, your rights and your wellbeing. You hold the history and the future. You inspire everything we do.

To all of our funders, we thank you. We could not do this work without you.

Children's Ground thanks our national Research Advisory Group for their support and guidance. We also thank their member institutions who are national leaders in research and evaluation. Please see the letter from the Group on the final page of this report.

Quotes through the report are attributable to First Nations family/staff members and were provided through the evaluation process, unless otherwise attributed.

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Photos throughout this report have been approved by community leaders. Please be advised that this report may contain photos of people who are deceased.

Voices from communities

"There's been lots of change. Just little kids coming to school [CG Early Learning] every day nearly is big"



"Kids are safe because all family are getting together now – parents are there too."

"When I first started [at Children's Ground], I didn't have a job and I was always struggling you know, with my kids going to school and stuff like that. But now that we've found Children's Ground, people's voices are being heard. And all those years that our Arrernte mob were struggling with education and finally we've got a say."

"Families feel proud."

"Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe is different to other organisations because it is run by us – our Elders, our families and all the community that come to Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. We speak with our own strong voices. Our structure is determined by our Arrernte kinship and we follow the leadership and guidance of our Elders. They support each generation to have their say; we want our younger generation to learn from the experience of others and take opportunities to get stronger at leading and telling our story. They are our future leaders. This is why our committee is open to all family members or people who come to Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe."



"It's [CG] always giving somebody a chance because that person who never had a job before, or had a job and didn't like it and then might like this one. So it makes them feel more comfortable and want to come into work all the time. They know that they're being supported."

"We've got quite a lot of little ones, new ones... and they're growing and growing, and growing and new ones are coming."



"We talk with families about Children's Ground – we talk about safety so we make it a safe place. We tell them no fighting at Children's Ground. At home she [daughter] gets scared when there is screaming and fighting, but it's not like that at Children's Ground."

"When you go to mainstream classes they don't invite them [families] for children's learning... Like when I was working [in mainstream school] there was no involvement with families... only a meeting when somebody just broke a window or something or somebody's making trouble or fighting with kids. That was the only time that they brought in the families... But now, we got families involved with children's learning."



About this evaluation



This first evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground in Central Australia) covers a three-year period of establishing and growing the CG Approach with communities from 2017 to 2019.

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation has ethics approval from the Central Australian Human Research Ethics committee, and the evaluation method, data analysis and report have been oversighted by a national Research Advisory Group, consisting of experts in academic, community and systems research and evaluation. See the Research Advisory Group's endorsement of this evaluation report on page 21.

Children's Ground's evaluation framework is presented through both a Western and Arrernte lens.

Arrernte Evaluation Framework

In 2011, Arrernte leaders articulated the CG Approach and outcomes in this painting. Since starting Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia), Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance) has used this painting through the analysis of outcomes of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe¹.

This picture represents our home, land, communities and people. We see this painting as a living image, we are living it and leading it. People have lived it for the last sixty thousand years - even today we still live it, but we are bombarded from all these negative influences.

This painting shows us standing strong as a group. We are standing together, and we invite others to come join and be strong with us. We all work together, different languages and dialects coming together. This is how we lead Children's Ground.

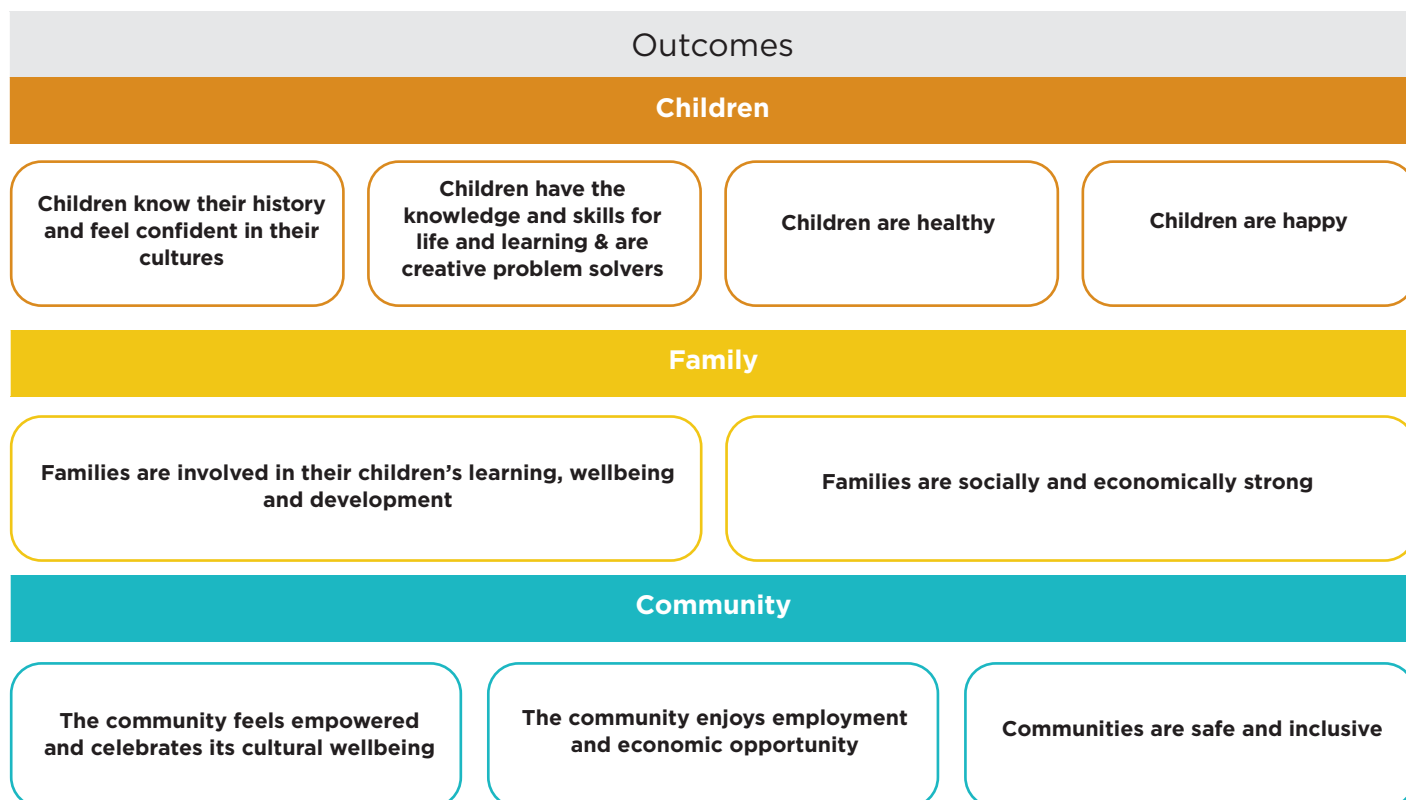
We use this painting to evaluate how we are going with Children's Ground. We are collecting numbers about kids and families engaging in learning, health and work. We are also collecting stories from our families and staff. We look at both the numbers and stories to see if we are making changes for kids that we all want to see.

¹ See full evaluation report for a detailed description of each element of the painting.

Western Evaluation Framework

The Western evaluation framework has nine long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community, outlined in Figure 1. Short and medium-term progress indicators are attached to each outcome to measure change and impact over 25 years of the CG Approach. Short-term indicators are focused on establishing equitable access to and engagement in services, supports and opportunities. Medium and longer-term progress indicators focus on impact for children, families and communities.

Figure 1: Children's Ground longitudinal evaluation framework



Children's Ground's 25-year longitudinal evaluation looks at three key evaluation questions:

- Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended? (process analysis)
- What progress occurred towards longer term impact against the evaluation outcomes? (impact analysis)
- What are the systemic drivers for change? (systems analysis)

The evaluation reports on; a baseline for the longitudinal 25-year evaluation; process effectiveness and integrity; performance against key practice principles (intent); and early impact in progress measures towards long term outcomes.

While Central Australia was not at full scale operations for the CG Approach, this evaluation assessed development and impact in the context of the full CG Approach and long-term evaluation outcomes.

The evaluation has been undertaken within a Participatory Action Research model that respects the knowledge and experience of local people and provides them with agency over research and evaluation processes. First Nations leaders have been involved in designing and leading data collection and evaluation from the outset.

"Research is the story of 65,000 years of the way we lived on such a hard country and how we lived here. People knew their environment - through watching and seeing - they learnt from observing what was happening. They knew the nature, the stars and what season was coming. And they passed this on through the stories of old people. This is research. This is how we survived. This is how we looked after country. We do research every day of our lives. This is what we are doing now - evaluating what we do at Children's Ground - watching and seeing the changes. It is important to our Aboriginal story and for Children's Ground. We are doing research our way and the Western ways. We need to do both. Government looks at numbers - we need to tell it that way as well our way - we have to look at things in many ways."

William Tilmouth, Senior Arrernte man, Children's Ground co-founder and Chair of Board



Regional data:

How First Nations families are experiencing life today

99%

of the children and young people in detention are Aboriginal⁵

89%

of children in out-of-home-care are Aboriginal - 11x more than non-Aboriginal children⁶

41.9%

of Aboriginal children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC developmental domains⁴

12.5%

of Aboriginal people (20 to 24 years) achieved Year 12 or equivalent³

66.5%

of Aboriginal children (<15 years) are in jobless families⁷

In CG communities:

73%

of First Nations people speak an Aboriginal language⁸

73%

reported Aboriginal language has gotten weaker in the last 10 years⁹

14%

of children had engaged in early learning before Children's Ground started²

96%

experienced the death of a family member in the last 12 months¹⁰

53%

reported times when there was not enough food in the house¹¹

47%

reported times when there was no power¹²

² Children's Ground internal administrative data. 2017-2020. Unpublished

³ PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. March 2017 release

⁴ Australian Early Development Census data (AEDC). Public Health Information Development Unit (PHIDU) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Social Health Atlas of Australia. March 2017 release

⁵ 2021 Northern Territory Government Office of Aboriginal Affairs: Closing the Gap Implementation Plan

⁶ Northern Territory Government Department of Territory Families 2015-16 Annual

⁷ PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

⁸ Children's Ground internal population baseline survey data. 2020. Unpublished

⁹ Children's Ground internal population baseline survey data. 2020. Unpublished

¹⁰ Children's Ground internal population baseline survey data. 2020. Unpublished

¹¹ Children's Ground internal population baseline survey data. 2020. Unpublished

¹² Children's Ground internal population baseline survey data. 2020. Unpublished



Children's Ground's early progress and findings



82%

of children
across 4
communities
engaged in **early
years learning**

100%

children received early
childhood **learning**
through their first
language and
culture

224

children

engaged in targeted
preventative **health
promotion**

July 2018-2019, **487** family
members engaged in **health
promotion** and support

107

people engaged in
governance and decision-
making for their families
and communities

150

young
people

337

adults

978

people of all ages
engaged in
Ampe-kenhe
Ahelhe

89%

of families
reported
that children's
**physical and
mental health** improved



6

languages
strengthened through
learning



100%

of families reported
increased access to
services for **physical and
emotional health** and
wellbeing



59 First Nations people were
employed at Children's Ground

84% were previously
unemployed

34% of staff had never
worked before

The Children’s Ground Approach

Children’s Ground is a First Nations systems solution to empower children and communities to achieve social, cultural and economic agency and lifelong wellbeing. Led at the community level, the Children’s Ground Approach (CG Approach) addresses the key social, cultural and economic determinants targeting key building blocks to achieve long term generational and sustainable change.

The CG Approach frontloads resources into equitable access and prevention. Local leadership and governance are backed by resources for high-quality learning, health and employment that is culturally responsive.

As shown in Figure 4, the CG Approach is a systems reform agenda that encompasses:

- Five systemic areas that create enabling conditions for systems change
- An integrated service platform of learning, health, employment, governance and community and cultural development and wellbeing (see Figure 3)
- Key practice principles which guide how the CG Approach works with the community



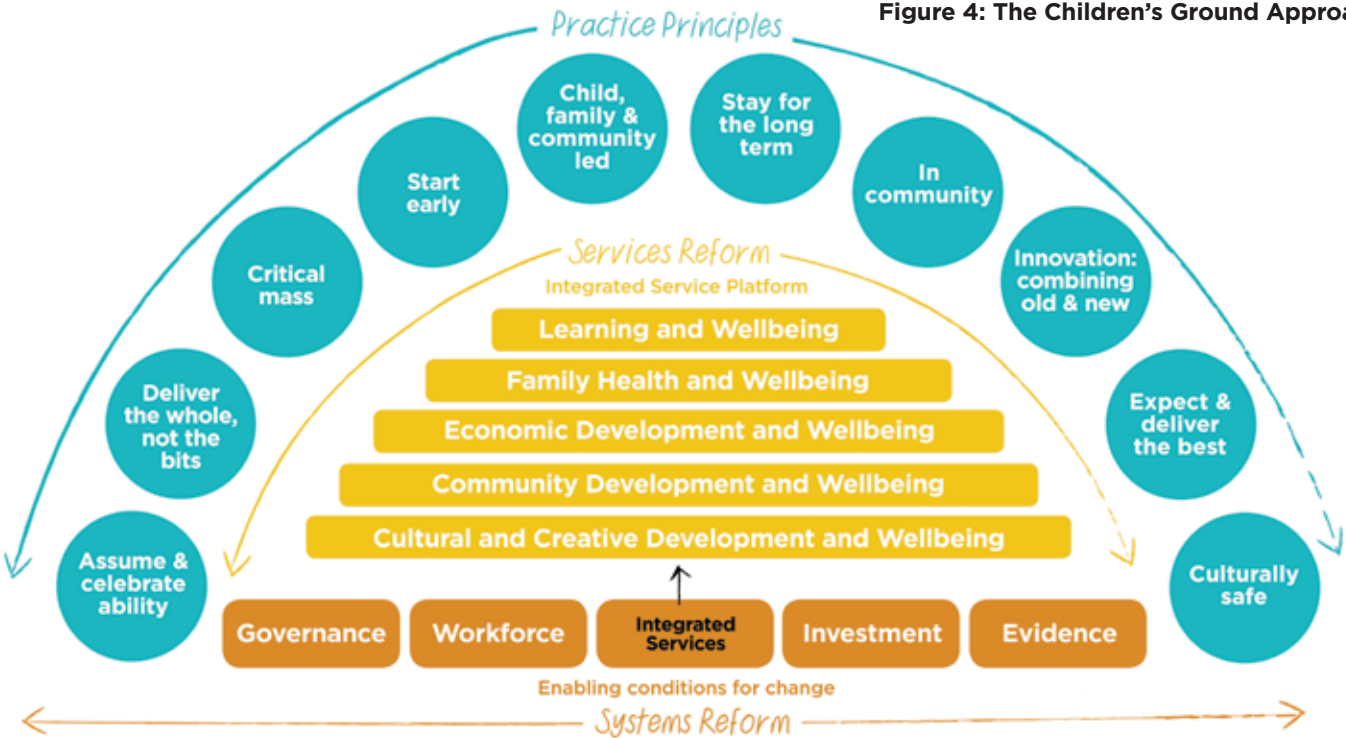
Figure 2: Ingkerrenyeken Anyenteke-irreme (Child, Family and Community together)

As shown in Figure 2, the CG Approach recognises the critical and influential relationship between children, families and communities as fundamental to long term change.

Figure 3: Children’s Ground Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform



Figure 4: The Children’s Ground Approach



Establishing & Growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe



In 2016, at the request from Elders and with support from the Children's Ground's Board, it was decided to introduce the CG Approach as a 'growth model' in Alice Springs.

Insufficient funding meant that initial attempts to establish the Approach in 2011 were not progressed. At the end of 2015, Arrernte Elders asked Children's Ground to return to Alice Springs. Their urgency was driven by watching the passing of Elders and their own vulnerability due to age. M.K. Turner OAM stated, "We need to start Children's Ground here, bring it back here, for our kids and families, before I pass away".

The Elders leading Children's Ground have a fifty-year history of educational and community leadership and contributed to the design of the CG Approach. They wanted to lead fundamental change in their communities, including the protection of language and culture and improved education, health and wellbeing for the next generation of children.

Elders identified four communities for implementation within the broader Arrernte nation. Community Engagement and Planning (CEP) was undertaken in 2016 ahead of implementation in 2017. In January 2017, the CG Approach was established in three communities across the Central Australia region (Irrkerlantye,

Mpweringke Anapipe and Yarrenyty Arltere), and in June 2019, when additional funding became available, operations began in Uyenpere Atwatye.

This evaluation covers the period of early implementation and development of the 'growth model'. This meant implementing the CG Approach and the suite of integrated services over time, based on the resources available and with the intention to reach full scale delivery that can be sustained for 25 years. The staged implementation saw delivery and engagement grow each year as funding increased over the period. Full scale delivery was not reached during this period.

The table below shows the growth over time by each service area of Children's Ground's Integrated Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform.

This evaluation marks year three of the 25-year Children's Ground strategy for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. Implementation of the CG Approach in Central Australia started with delivering 20% of the model at the beginning of 2017 and increasing delivery to 60% by the end of 2019.

The release of the report has been delayed due to COVID-19, which interrupted necessary processes for First Nations leadership in data, analysis and reporting.

Tracking against full CG Approach and model	CEP	<25%	25-50%	50-75%	75-100%
	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Learning & Wellbeing					
Family Health & Wellbeing					
Economic Development & Wellbeing					
Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing					
Community Development & Wellbeing					

Key findings: Change and impact for children

Outcome area: **Children have the knowledge and skills for life-long learning**¹³



A new cohort of children are engaged in culturally safe early years learning - children who had rarely or never engaged before.

Key finding:

82% of children (0-5 years) across four communities engaged in early years learning (223 children).

Before Children’s Ground, only **14%** had previously engaged in early learning.

Graph 1: Number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in Learning & Wellbeing with Children’s Ground from 2017-19, by year




100% of children engaged in early learning alongside their family.

Children engaging in early learning alongside their family is becoming the new normal.



¹³ Key outcome area from Children’s Ground Western Evaluation Framework

Outcome area: **Children know and feel confident in their culture**¹⁴



Children
are learning and
developing in
their culture.



100% of children
engaged in cultural
learning on country,
in their first language
and alongside and
led by their family.

Children's Ground seeks to provide the space for Elders and cultural leaders to revitalise and re-establish learning, language and cultural knowledge systems within and outside of formal early learning sessions. This is consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Children's Ground's Learning and Wellbeing framework requires children to learn on country. This is enacted through a policy of twice-weekly on-country learning led by First Nations educators and Elders, underpinned by kinship and law.

The evaluation found that most children progressed in their first language and cultural knowledge over the period, and that cultural foundations of the learning approach were a key driver to engagement of children and families.

"Through Children's Ground, for the first time in our colonial history, we are creating places of education that come from our language and culture, that honour our identity and knowledge and history... Our next generation will be formidable. Their identity will not be denied."

William Tilmouth, Senior Arrernte man, Children's Ground co-founder and Chair of Board

"It's really important for our children to walk on their Country - to know what it's called, what the story is for that place and how they are related to the land. There's so much to learn and learning is everywhere when you are on Country."

"It has been so long. It is good to see somewhere where kids feel empowered and happy and feel like people actually value their culture. I have worked with kids... their experience has been that they have been told all their life that it is bad to be an Aboriginal person. It is sad. You shouldn't feel like that. You should feel proud about your background and your family and your history...you should feel proud about being Aboriginal. It is not a bad thing. It's a good thing. I think this place [Children's Ground] is building that."

"I've got great pride in working with my people and teaching my little ones. Because I want them to grow up to be smart people too."



Valuing culture and
identity was a key driver
of engagement for
children and families

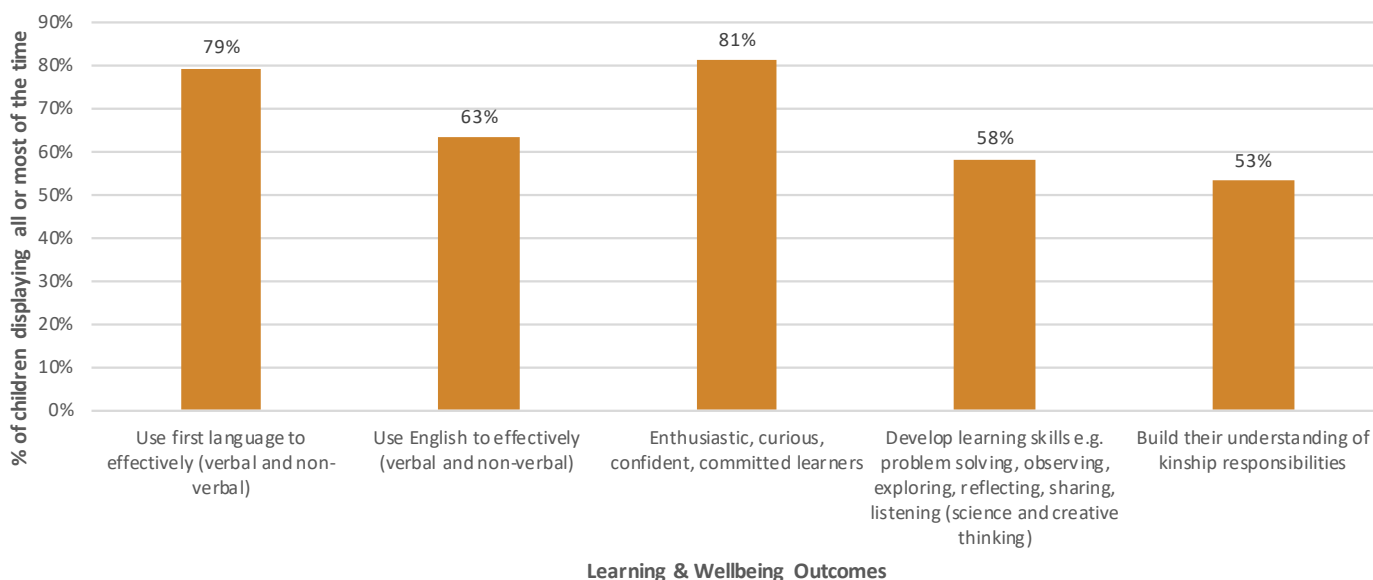
¹⁴ Key outcome area from Children's Ground Western Evaluation Framework



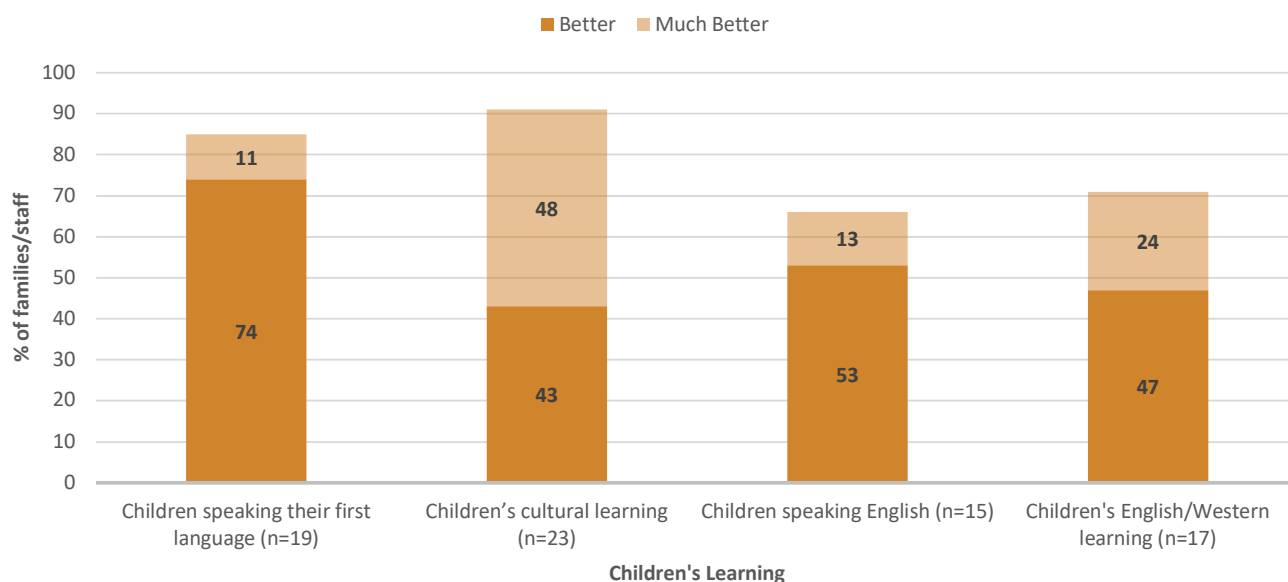
The Akaltje Learning and Wellbeing progress and outcomes framework was developed from the Arrernte learning curriculum framework- the Arrernte Angkentje, written by Arrernte Elders and educationalists. It also drew from the National Early Years Learning Framework and international frameworks.

Developmental progress for children 0-8 years is assessed by Arrernte and Western educators.

Graph 2:



Graph 3: First Nations family/staff perspectives on children's learning



"There's been a lot of changes. Just little kids coming to school [CG Early Learning] every day nearly is big."

"We've got everything here [at CG]. There is nothing to do at home so when they are here they have everything and their mind is learning. They love it."

"Children's Ground has changed how they act. At home they are mad, crazy you know. But at Children's Ground they are good... and we practice this at home."

"I finished the session by telling the women that any good early childhood service anywhere in Australia would be envious of the learning environment they had just created for their children right here on country. It had all the elements of a great learning space: high quality relationships between adult and child, an adult teacher for each child, a learning environment supported by natural resources and most importantly, kids immersed in their own language and culture. My EC [Early Childhood] self had an obligation to add that these were the most important requirements to prepare kids for school. This little community group out at Whitegate had it all."

Helen Fitzgerald, Children's Ground Early Learning Educator

Summary of change and impact

Children's Ground's culturally based Learning and Wellbeing framework has resulted in unprecedented engagement of children in early years learning in four communities in Central Australia.

Children's Ground has created equitable access and has engaged a new cohort of children aged 0-5 years in early learning. Most children had not engaged in early years learning prior to Children's Ground.

There was a steady increase in numbers of children engaging in early learning each year.

Engagement of children and families was directly enabled through the Arrernte Angkentye Early Years Learning curriculum framework designed by Arrernte educators. This was combined with First Nations policies and standards for delivery including family engagement.

For children and families in Central Australia, this is the first time a culturally designed early years learning service has been available to communities in a sustained way.

As reported by families and staff, children engaging in early learning in their first language has improved children's cultural and Western learning and development outcomes. Children's Ground continues to build towards the delivery of early learning to Universal Access levels.



Outcome area: **Children are healthy and happy**¹⁵



Key findings:

- **224** children (aged 0-5 years) engaged in targeted preventative health (skin, ears, eyes, dental, weight, immunisation)
- **100%** of children engaged in Western and cultural health promotion (through engagement in early learning)
- **89%** of families reported that children's physical health (their body and nutrition) and emotional health (their mind and behaviour) was better or much better

Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing platform and framework is titled *Utnenge, Tyerrtye, Mwerre Atnyenetyeke Iltye Tyerrtye Urrperle-kenhenge* 'Health in the Hands of the People'.

Children's Ground delivers health promotion universally (for all people accessing Children's Ground), as well as in targeted ways by working with children and their families to address their specific health concerns and needs. Maternal and child health promotion, social and emotional wellbeing and cultural health are key focusses. Health promotion is also integrated in early years learning for children aged 0-8 years.

The Children's Ground Family Health & Wellbeing framework was not implemented in Central Australia formally until late 2018 following the receipt of funding. Prior to this, parts of the framework were implemented e.g. nutrition deliberately embedded in all early learning from the beginning.

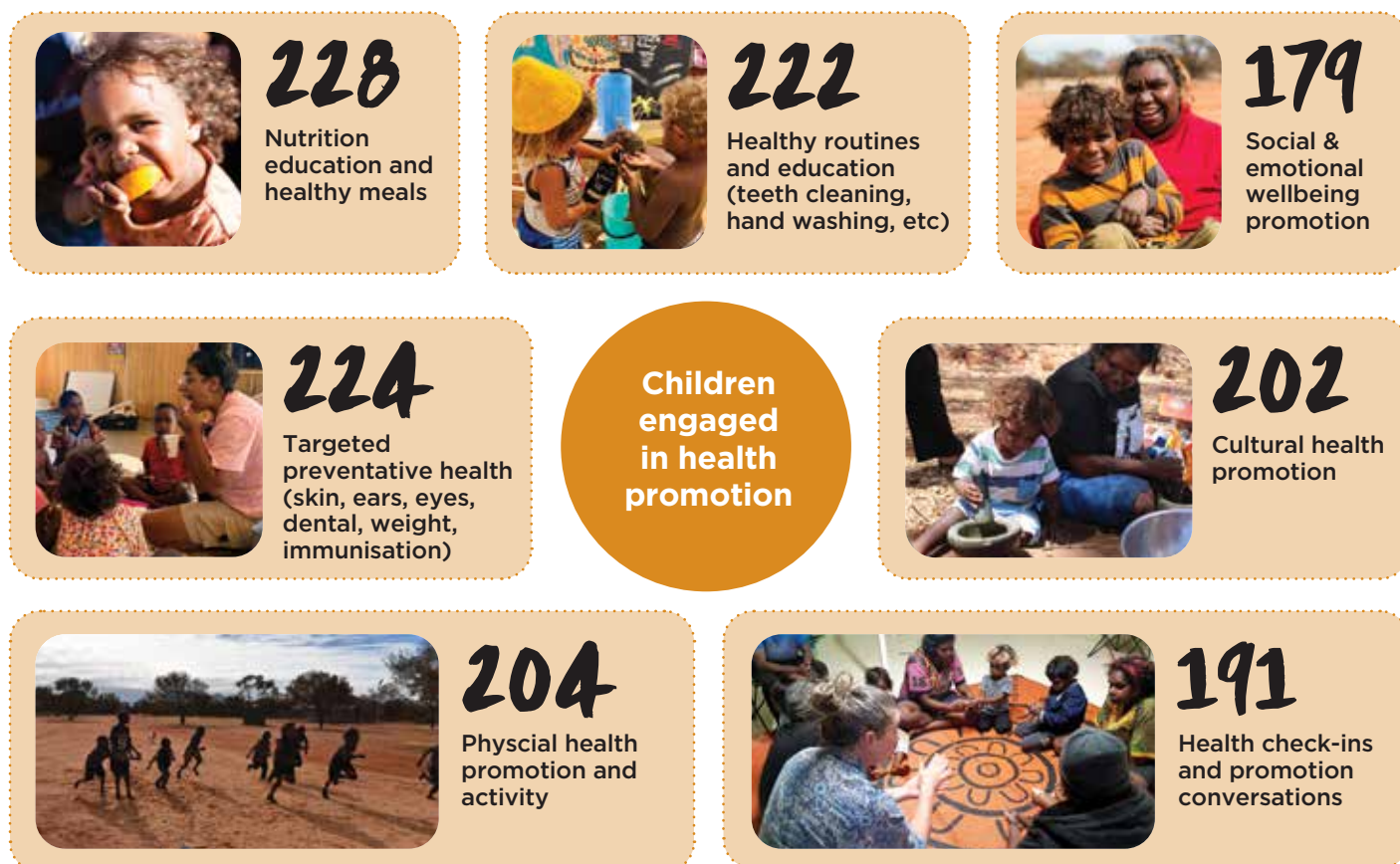
"We do our healthy routines with the little ones, so we teach them about keeping themselves healthy, talking about nutrition and how it's important to always have healthy nutritional snacks, like no sugar in their diet."

"The health team are always talking with the kids. They are learning about health – nose blowing, washing hands, cleaning teeth – I can see them learning. They have songs with these things – they are singing them all the time, at home too. They know the songs and what to do for each song."



¹⁵ Key outcome area from Children's Ground Western Evaluation Framework

Figure 5: Number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in health promotion, by type, from July 2018 to December 2019



A core element of the growth model in Central Australia focused on increasing access to and engagement in places and environments of safety that promote and respond to children's social/emotional wellbeing (SEWB).

"Our intention should always be to create a calm and settled space where kids and adults can creatively express their deeply held emotions through art and play. Our goal is for kids to practice and develop self-regulation - to discover ways they can calm and relax themselves as they play."

Helen Fitzgerald, Early Childhood Educator, Children's Ground



Universal and targeted health promotion and support for children through Western and cultural health practices resulted in improved child development, wellbeing and behaviour change.

The data indicates that Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing approach improved health access and established health practices as a regular and normalised focus for children. Building health literacy from children's earliest years lays the foundations for healthy life choices.

Health promotion provided in community and in first languages increased health agency and early intervention and prevention. This was evident through regular health hygiene practices of children and nutrition changes through improved nutritional intake, literacy and food security. Cultural health knowledge and practice also improved.

Families of children with targeted health needs were supported to access health services, illness was identified and early intervention occurred.

Children's emotional wellbeing was supported through trauma informed practice, emotional regulation, relaxation and a strong focus on the spirit of children being strengthened through being on country and engaging in cultural health practice.

Key findings: Change and impact for families

Outcome area: **Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development**¹⁶



Key findings:

- **319** family members 18+ years engaged in learning and health promotion alongside their children.
- **100%** of families felt there were more activities and opportunities for children and families to spend time together.
- **100%** of families reported that families are 'walking alongside their children' more or a lot more.

"Children's Ground is different from other childcare organisations or childcare centres, because in Children's Ground you see families working together with families. Families are there all the time with their kids, watching them. The children love families being there, seeing, 'Oh, I've got my mum and my aunty here. My grandmother.' That's what's good about Children's Ground, is families being there with families, for the children."

"Families are not just sitting at home anymore – family are getting together...Kids are learning quickly because they are learning from their family."



Outcome: **Families are socially and economically strong**¹⁷

Key findings:

- **487** family members engaged in health promotion and support (150 young people 9-17 years and 337 adult family members 18+ years).
- **100%** of families/staff reported increased access to services for physical and mental health.



A majority of families at Children's Ground live in a context of complex trauma and social stress including overcrowding, family violence, economic poverty, grief and health concerns.

The role of Children's Ground's Family Health team is to work with families to prevent illness and to improve health outcomes for those living with illness. By delivering in community, the team works with individuals and families to address multiple and complex health burdens.

Through delivery in first language and community context, the aim is to improve health literacy, health access, prevention and early intervention and health management. The aim is to bridge the gap by removing the structural and cultural barriers to access while making health and wellbeing a visible part of everyday life.

The social strengthening of families includes physical health, mental health, cultural health, connectedness, interpersonal relationships, family living circumstances and safety.

"Kids and families are more confident when Children's Ground is involved. By themselves it's hard to make appointments anywhere."

"People come in here because they got health workers and stuff like that support to take them to the hospital or for their appointments, go to housing or to all those things that come in – the problems that happen."


"Kids are safe because all family are getting together now – parents are there too."

"Makes me feel free [being at CG], and my daughter too."

¹⁶ Key outcome area from Children's Ground Western Evaluation Framework

¹⁷ Key outcome area from Children's Ground Western Evaluation Framework

Outcome area: **Families are socially and economically strong**¹⁸



People who were living with chronic unemployment are working.

Key findings:

- **59** First Nations people were employed at Children's Ground.
84% were unemployed when they started at Children's Ground.
34% of staff had never worked.
- **83%** of families/staff referred to employment of young people and adults as role modelling for young children.

"It's [CG] always giving somebody a chance because that person who never had a job before, or had a job and didn't like it and then might like this one. So it makes them feel more comfortable and want to come into work all the time. They know that they're being supported."

"It gives them an opportunity to be a part of something. Be a part of Children's Ground and work. This could be the first time for a person, that has never had a job in their lives and it builds their confidence too."

"People are working and getting more confidence and learning too."

"It's good for kids to see family working. They feel much better, Mum got work. Working on country. My kids love it when I go to work – they have a smile on their face."

"Really good role model for kids... they can get up and go to school every day, and put education in front, first, and they know that there's a responsible person that they look up to."

Some families/staff talked about their personal experiences with employment at Children's Ground. These included both positive experiences and challenges.

"It was the first thing I had in my life where I felt really good. I kept coming and it has kept growing and growing."

"I'm very proud to work here."

"I try my best every day to come. My feeling in my heart is that I want to come, but I get pulled away for other things."

"When I first started [at Children's Ground], I didn't have a job and I was always struggling you know, with my kids going to school and stuff like that. But now that we've found Children's Ground, people's voices are being heard. And all those years that our Arrernte mob were struggling with education and finally we've got a say."

Creation of First Language learning resources: learning, employment and enterprise outcomes.



Summary of change and impact

Extensive engagement of families in the learning and health of their children has been evidenced. The reports from families demonstrate the strengthening of family connection, health and wellbeing and sense of empowerment.

Evidence of strong employment outcomes in the context of a decline in employment across the Northern Territory (Closing the Gap) is significant. The processes and systems that have enabled First Nations employment include the strength based, flexible employment model that responds to key barriers to engagement.

Families have high aspirations for their children and grandchildren to experience a different future and life than they did. The key drivers of family engagement have been evidenced as local First Nations governance, employment, health access and prioritising the time and space for families to connect.

Through the principle of 'family and community led', families were involved in early learning policy development and decided that children will always come to early learning accompanied by a family member. First culture and language were regularly celebrated through family and community events which were soft entry points for families into early learning, family health, employment and community governance.

¹⁸ Key outcome area from Children's Ground Western Evaluation Framework

Key findings: Change and impact for community

Impact on community outcomes requires a long term strategy. Change in these outcomes can only be realised when the generation of children growing up with Children's Ground become young adults, have their own families and are the critical mass within the community who enjoy cultural, social and political opportunity and empowerment. The following provides a brief overview of progress to date.

The prevalence of injustice and trauma

Elders and leaders reflected on a wide range of experiences impacting their lives and the lives of their families. These were recorded through the community engagement period and in the evaluation process during a session on baseline trauma and stress. These are considered prevalent for 100% of the population.

- Massacres
- Children removed
- Land taken away
- People moved off land (into missions)
- Religion forced on people
- Forbidden from speaking First Language
- Foreign diseases brought in
- Culture taken away - people tried and continue to resist
- Alcohol/drugs/tea/sugar/tobacco
- Basics card - control of our money
- Control over lives - everything
- Trauma
- Still not listened to - no voice
- Chronic ill health
- Poor literacy and numeracy
- Low income
- Not a lot of opportunity/jobs
- Poor housing
- No running water
- Poor nutrition
- Die younger
- Issues with grog and safety
- Suicide
- Lots of people in prison
- If you speak up, you don't get results
- Kids on the streets
- Racism
- Not recognising traditional law people
- Government got involved in Aboriginal law when they should not have
- People now go straight to police for protection which can make argument worse
- Funerals
- Sadness for everyone
- Accidents, suspicious death, missing person
- Alcohol-related death, domestic violence
- Medical conditions
- Deaths in custody
- Black Lives Matter and what it means to us

Outcome areas: **The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing**
The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity (reported in 'Change and impact for families')
Communities are safe and inclusive¹⁹

Key finding:

- **107** First Nations people engaged in governance and decision-making for their families and communities.



Increased empowerment and agency in local decision-making.

Community empowerment and leadership

"We are speaking up at meetings, we are telling our story at conferences, we are pushing ourselves to lead. We're in the driver's seat now - everyone else can get in the back seat."
Lorraine Gorey, Senior Arrernte Educator

Families, leaders and staff were asked 'How First Nations people making the decisions about their lives and about Children's Ground is now, compared to before Children's Ground started.' Of those who answered the question, all (n=17) reported it was better (59%) or much better (41%).

"We engage everybody, families and children, and all. I'm being a leader, leading the way and showing what we can do for our children's future, and we are being strong leaders and all that... We can show them our way of leading, being a great leader and being a good role model for our children."

Adults expressed hope and pride in seeing engagement and leadership within the next generation, many of whom had their cultural learning and cultural transmission disrupted by the impact of colonisation.

Prior to being engaged at Children's Ground, many young people were unemployed and experiencing serious risks with the criminal justice system, suicidality, alcohol and other drugs. As they emerge as leaders and build their confidence, their position as role models to children is shifting their status quo; the effect on long-term wellbeing of their community is evident.

"I think they are learning too [young people]. Doing governance and having the strength to get up and talk in public. You can see young people - they want to do things... And they watching too how people work, and listening."

¹⁹ Key outcome area from Children's Ground Western Evaluation Framework



Families are
strengthening across
generations.

Key finding:

- **978** people of all ages engaged in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.



Families feel safe at
Children's Ground.

Key finding:

- **63%** of staff/family members commented on improved safety without specifically being asked about safety.



"Children's Ground is a safe place, you know, we don't want to bring whatever issues that are outside of Children's Ground into Children's Ground. We want what's best for our kids to learn."

"To tell you the truth, I've been really bored listening to other people making decisions for us. Now it's us that are the ones making the decisions for ourselves and for our children."

"I'm looking at how we used to - how we grew up with our grandparents teaching us a lot about the world. Through the eyes of Aboriginal people. And we're passing our knowledge on to our little ones."

"We have got generations of people here. We have got the old girls, and then we have got the younger ones - their daughters, and then you have got their kids and their grannies... I think having that several generations of family participating, gives us a really strong possibility of surviving into the future."

"I am comfortable here because it is better than outside. When I pass this boundary outside of Children's Ground I feel alone - wondering what am I going to do. My feeling here is really good to have - always someone to talk to."

Summary of change and impact

While it is too early to determine community level impact, early progress in community outcomes was evidenced in First Nations Governance, community inclusion and safety, economic inclusion and cultural and social community level engagement.

This evaluation found that Children's Ground strengthened the social connection for individuals and communities. Employment, placed based delivery, local governance and community events created a range of opportunities for social connectedness between families and communities.

Community governance reinforced First Nations standards relating to core obligations of customary law, roles and responsibilities which underpinned decision making and service delivery. People reported experiencing cultural empowerment.

The CG Approach established governance and service design and delivery processes that shifted the balance of power into the hands of local First Nations people.

The hope and pride reported by Elders and families from seeing young people engage in employment, leadership and cultural learning alongside the children is evidence of the CG Approach beginning to empower next generation leadership within intergenerational environments.

These are the central building blocks for long-term community level change over the 25-year CG Approach.

Process findings and analysis:

Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended?

Key Process Findings - Summary

The evaluation found that the CG Approach has largely been implemented as intended within the context of a growth model. Not having the resources for implementation of the full CG Approach impacted standards for access, place-based delivery, critical mass (service reach), full delivery and integration of services. Focus areas for improvement are quality, training and improved systems to structurally embed key practice principles.

"We've come a long way with Children's Ground to here. From starting up from a little place then growing. We got new staff and new people... We've got a lot of little kids that want to come to Children's Ground. A lot of families too. More families getting involved."

Key findings and summaries in relation to evidence of process effectiveness and progress in relation to each practice principle are presented here, using a traffic light system.



On-track and effective



Strengthening required



Not on-track

*Child,
family &
community
led*

Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme governance committee, led by Elders and community leaders from each community, provides strong leadership and meets weekly to direct Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. Each community has defined leadership aligned with First Nations governance. Over the period, there was increased engagement of young people in governance. Further need to strengthen place-based, community level and daily governance.

*In-
community
(place-based)*

Due to limited resources, operations began as centralised and service 'to', rather than in community. 'In-community' has progressed in each area but remains compromised. Achieving standards of in-community delivery requires dedicated resources for each community.

*Start
early*

A clear focus on setting a new foundation for the next generation of children. Prioritising integrated learning, health and cultural wellbeing in early childhood (children aged 0-5 years). Key focus on prevention through social, cultural and economic determinants such as education, health promotion, employment and cultural empowerment.

*Expect
and deliver
the best*

Progress made with some key delivery and organisational standards of excellence. It takes time and adequate resources to design and embed excellence from cultural and Western perspectives. Achieving high quality delivery consistently and efficiently are areas for development as resources grow.

*A critical
mass
(work with
everyone)*

Achieved a critical mass (at least 75%) of children (aged 0-8 years) in the service population and their families. Further work is needed to understand the full population and to reach children and families who are not currently engaged.

*Assume
and celebrate
ability*

Effectively mobilised community and individual strengths, while embedding first language and culture across the CG Approach.

*Deliver
the whole,
not the
bits*

The full Children's Ground integrated platform has not been implemented. Implementation grew over the period as resources increased. Integration across platform areas occurred but requires strengthening. Local service collaborations occurred but were limited due to capacity.

*Stay for
the long-
term*

This principle can only be assessed over time. Key early foundations of First Nations governance, employment and long term strategic plans are in place.

*Innovation –
combining the
old and new
ways*

Effectively established both cultural and Western approaches across the service platform and within key organisational systems. Need to grow and strengthen depth and quality over time.

First Nations findings and analysis



Tyerrtye Arrernte mapele iwerre ineme. Anwerne angkentyele ileme nthakenhe mpwaretyeke. Arrpenhele ilettyeke arrangkwe. Anwerne apurte-irremele decision mpwareme, tyerrtye mape akwethe angkeme community-ke ante itne ileme involved-irretyeke. Anwerne apurte-irremele alakenhe mpwareme. Anwernehe aweme. Arrantherre, tyerrtye mperlkere mapele aweme. Anwerneke amparre arrwekele arrernele ante iterrentye anwernekenhe awetyeke.

Community are making the decisions and leading: Arrernte people are leading the way. We have more people in decision making - people are always talking to community and getting people involved. We are making the decisions. No one is telling us what to do. We're all doing it together. We are being heard.

Anwerne akaltyele- atheme akngerre apmerenge ante communitynge. Apmere-nge akaltye- atheme re atyeporre anthurre aneme ampe mapeke ante itneke artweye mape, itne akaltye-irretyeke arrangkwe town-le anemele. Itne akaltye-irreme mwerre apmerere anemele.

Arrernte language, culture and family are everywhere: We are doing more learning on country and in the communities. Learning on country is the most important because children and families can't learn what they need to in town - on country they are learning culture that they will not learn in town - cultural learning.

Tyerrtye arrpenhe mape apetyame warrke-irretyeke anwernenge year arrpe-ananhele. Tyerrtye artweyenge atningke apetyame warrke-irretyeke. Warrke nenhe aneme second chance tyerrtye mape-ke Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.

Employment: More people are coming to work with us every year. A lot more families are coming and working. Employment is like a second chance for those that need it. People have chances and opportunity here at Children's Ground.

Akngerre-parte mape involve-irreme and itne iwerre imernemele. Anwerneke artweye mape akaltye-antheke akngerre-parte mapele, anwerne ampe ingkernenye mape mwantyele akaltye-anthetyeke, arntarnte aretyeke ante itele-aretyeke nthekenhe itne anwerne akaltyele antheke.

Elders are involved and leading: Knowledge from the old people being passed on, learned and respected by children and our young people and families.

Anwerne akngerre-irreme. Numbers akngerre-irreme, kele nhenhe mwerre. Ampe akweke mape apetyame. Ingkernenye mape apetyame warrke-irretyeke ante involve-irretyeke leadership-ke. Anwerne awethe uthemele ante angkemele ampe artweye mapeke. Tyerrtye arrpenhe mapeke anwerne arritye-kenhe akwete. Anwerne akwete ampe mape ante itneke artweye mapeke angketyeke.

Children and families learning together: We are growing. The numbers are going up which is good. More children are coming with their family. More babies are coming. More young people are coming along too and getting involved with the leadership. We need to do more Walk and Talk [community engagement] - we haven't got to some people yet. We need to keep working to get more children and families.

Akngerre-aparte mapele ileme tyerrtye ingkernenye ante ampe akweke mape itne iterrke anetyeke, itneke ilemele nenghe angkamele anetyeke ante decision mpwaremetyeke.

Next generation leadership: Elders are giving power to the young ones - getting them involved in the decisions.

Anwerne areme support akngerre artweyenge-ke. Tyerrtye arrpenhe mape nhenhe apure-irreme, anwerne mwerre awelheme ante inemele support anwerne apeke ahentye anemele.

Support for children and families: We see more support for families. People can get shame sometimes, but we are comfortable here and get support if we need it.

Systems findings and analysis



"Our abilities to close the gap in health disparities are being blocked at every turn because we are refusing to address the intrinsic interconnection of all social, economic, cultural and spiritual aspects of our life."

June Oscar, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2018

The Children's Ground Approach is designed to be fully implemented to achieve long term change. The evaluation found that it is possible to implement a growth model and achieve early stage impact, but that it is not sustainable and not optimal. Inadequate funding placed stress on all elements of the organisation and there was a cost to quality and standards. At the same time, the growth model achieved important early progress.

Children's Ground's integrated Learning, Wellbeing and Development service platform is designed to reflect First Nations approaches of life integration, rather than Western siloed services. First Nations systems integrate every aspect of a person's identity, wellbeing, learning, cultural responsibilities, kinship (family and social connections) and surrounding influences on each of these.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the authorising environments and conditions for integration were in place. Multidisciplinary teams were provided the flexibility and structure to work together and be

responsive in their support of children and families. While staff identified challenges and the need for further policies, systems and practice development, the integrated delivery enabled responsiveness and early intervention with children and families.

Place-based delivery in communities was not able to be implemented to the extent intended over the first three years. However, the in-community delivery that was achieved over the first years reportedly provided early experiences of physical and cultural safety in services in communities. It also enabled increased activity, delivery and opportunities improving the social, cultural and economic capital.

Within the constraints of the growth model, considerable progress was achieved in establishing the critical foundational elements of the Approach. The evaluation found that change was enabled through an inter-connected relationship between key elements of the Children's Ground Approach.

Reform in one area of service delivery and systems alone won't create sustained change

A key evaluation finding of the CG Approach in Central Australia and full model in Kakadu West Arnhem is that the key driver of early impact and change is the interconnectedness in delivery and the combined impact of the key system enablers (i.e. governance, workforce, investment, integrated services and evidence). There was an authorising environment for the integrated service delivery platform and culturally-based delivery in community. Arguably the most important enabler of change to date has been creating the space and conditions for the voice and culture of local First Nations people. This is not in isolation from integrated wrap around services, supports and opportunities, which were interconnected enablers across the system, service platform and delivery. The collective investment model enables both integrity in delivery and the processes of empowerment.

Local governance, integrated services, family employment, cultural safety and place-based delivery were all enabling conditions for change

This evaluation found that:

- Child and family engagement in early learning was enabled by support that reduced access barriers.
- Learning engagement was stimulated by culturally-based learning in first language and on country – which was in turn enabled by First Nations employment, planning and governance.
- Engagement in Western early learning was achieved through the provision of safe, culturally-based, relational and respectful learning environments.
- First Nations governance enabled employment, cultural standards in learning and high levels of family engagement.
- Universal integration of health promotion in early learning increased health knowledge and literacy of children and their families together.



Genuinely privileging culture and empowerment was a key driver for engagement

This evaluation demonstrates that the key drivers of engagement in Children's Ground are the visible respect for and privileging of first language and culture and community empowerment. Cultural safety and empowerment were achieved through First Nations employment, governance and intergenerational engagement – all of which enabled first language and culture to be embedded across all areas of the integrated service platform and activity delivery.

The strengths-based implementation and First Nations culture, governance and employment in design and delivery changed the relationship that people previously had with services – from one of being a recipient to one of being in control. This shifted the power in decision-making to sit with the communities and has been the most significant enabler and driver of empowerment. It also facilitated family-to-family engagement and intergenerational environments that are owned by the families and communities.

The Children's Ground Approach is aligned with leading practice

Western research about addressing the changing and complex needs of First Nations children and families identifies key features of a comprehensive, community-based service framework. This evaluation demonstrated that the CG Approach provides a framework to implement these key features alongside cultural knowledge systems and practices. The CG Approach has evidenced process effectiveness and early impact from incorporating these system features in design and delivery. Furthermore, it is translating and validating Western research in a First Nations context and has found that Western leading practice is achievable when it is implemented within a culturally safe framework and delivery model – led by First Nations people.

“Only by respecting the language, culture and knowledge of the learner can we together build literate, schooled and educated societies, where lifelong learning is the norm”.

Conclusion



"There are things we do well and things we can do better, and it is growing. Once we have got the whole model here, we can make bigger changes for people's lives."

This evaluation demonstrates that, even in the short-term, change is achievable when a service system is genuinely First Nations led, when first language and culture are privileged and when integrated services respond to the complex social, economic and cultural determinants of health, wellbeing and life.

The evaluation provides an important baseline against which to evaluate the long-term impact of Children's Ground in Central Australia.

"We are in the business of hope. Our families have not had the freedom to hope, knowing that they would be rejected and ridiculed. But now this is what I see. I see hope and with hope I see empowerment".

William Tilmouth, Senior Arrernte man, Children's Ground, co-founder and Chair of Board, 2020

Research Advisory Group endorsement

October 2021

William Tilmouth
Chair of the Board
Chair Research Advisory Group
Children's Ground

Dear William

Re: Evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach in Central Australia, 2017-2019

We commend the Children's Ground team on delivering this baseline and early progress evaluation report about establishing and increasing your operations in Central Australia from 2017 to 2019. As the first of many public evaluations from Central Australia throughout your 25-year strategy you are still in the early days, yet on a positive pathway for evidencing generational change, with and led by First Nations communities.

For this evaluation, we have provided advice and guidance for the evaluation method, data collection and analysis. This report was reviewed by our Research Advisory Group on multiple occasions to interrogate the data, analysis and evaluative judgements. We have expressed our confidence in the rigour of this evaluation and endorse the high quality and participatory method and robust analysis processes.

Children's Ground's commitment to long-term public and transparent evaluation is a credit to your approach and organisation, particularly amongst a landscape where initiatives and programs for First Nations people are often not extensively or well evaluated. You have demonstrated the importance of services and systems to deliver in an environment of continuous learning and improvement to maintain responsiveness to and empowerment of communities.

Evaluation of real-world, whole of community initiatives can be challenging. The Children's Ground team has navigated these challenges and presented a comprehensive, fair and balanced assessment of the progress, early impact and the challenges associated with resources, growth and scaling. This evaluation demonstrates that over the three years of this evaluation, Children's Ground's delivery of their Approach in Central Australia has achieved a lot with very little in the context of their fully resourced model.

The significant focus on process evaluation clearly articulates how you are seeking to achieve systems and service reform in real-world settings. It also evidences the importance and impact of all processes and systems being empowering and enabling First Nations people.

Children's Ground is breaking the mold and transforming the way systems can work alongside First Nations communities. The collation of many direct quotes from First Nations staff and families as evidence is amplifying the voice of the First Nations communities who lead Children's Ground. The respect for and empowerment of First Nations people in the evaluation shines through and provides valuable insights for anyone working with First Nations communities.

This report builds on the evidence from Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem. With an increasing evidence base, the demonstrated effectiveness and early impact of the Children's Ground Approach is compounding. To date, your two evaluations have shown progress in key government policy areas nationally and in the Northern Territory - progress that has not been publicly evidenced against Closing the Gap in employment, health and early childhood education.

Your next step is to share this report and evidence broadly and to use it to inform relevant policy and practice changes beyond Children's Ground. The report makes a compelling case for the continuation and broader implementation of this important work.

Kind regards,

Children's Ground Research Advisory Group

Professor Sally Brinkman: Co-Director, Fraser Mustard Centre. Senior Research Fellow, Telethon Kids Institute

Professor Komla Tsey: Tropical Leader/Research Professor, The Cairns Institute and College Arts Society and Education, James Cook University, Bebegu Yumba campus


Professor David Thomas: Head of Tobacco Control Research program, Menzies School of Health Research.

Mr Matthew James: Deputy CEO, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Dr Tim Moore: Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Professor Sven Silburn: (ret. previously) Director, Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research

Professor Fiona Arney: Director, Positive Futures Research and Arney Chong Consulting



"We've been following government nearly all our lives – this is a new beginning. We are following a new path, our own path as First Nations people for the future of our children. At Children's Ground, the community is taking the lead. We are very proud of that. We are the government of ourselves."

M.K. Turner, OAM, Arrernte Professor, Elder and Law Woman
Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Director Children's Ground