

*"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

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

2017 to 2019 | Baseline and early progress



# Acknowledgements



Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia) is held by our Elders. This evaluation is led and guided by their vision and standards. We thank our Elders for everything.

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. This report is the result of many years of history, commitment and unrelenting determination to create a new reality. 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.

Children's Ground would like to acknowledge and thank all the passionate and dedicated staff and volunteers who have worked alongside families in Central Australia to establish and grow Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. Your commitment and contribution to the rights of First Nations children, families and communities is visible every day. Your efforts to collect data and stories are critical to Children's Ground evaluating and evidencing systems change and impact.

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*Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe - Children's Ground in Central Australia: 2017 to 2019 Baseline and early progress*  
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# Foreword



In 2016, Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe<sup>1</sup> (Children's Ground Central Australia) established our governance committee and named it 'Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme' (everyone being responsible). We are Elders, Traditional Owners and senior cultural people for each community who lead Children's Ground.

*"Nhenhe lyete atere aneme apmere arenye mape, tyerrtye akwete anemeke, tyerrtye akngerre iterre-irreme ampeke. Nhenhe arraty anwerne arne akngerre akngarteiwelhetyeke Children's Ground-eng. Anwerne numbers nhenhe mape mpwareme lytete, aretyenge nhenge 20 years iperre. Nhenge 20 years iperre anwerne ayeye atnyenetyeke ampe anwerne-kenhe mape ante anwerneke artweye mape akerte anwerne tyerrtye urrperle mape. Anwerne aretyeke lyete anwerne arraty apeke target renhe atweme-target arpenhe mpwaremele ante arpenhe, arraty mpwaremele. Alakenhe arraty mwerre research nenhe mpwaretyeke. Anwerne akngarte-iwelheme alakenhe anwerne iterrentye.*

*There is a real fear in the community – for people that get stuck... people worry for the kids. These are some of the really big things that we want to change with Children's Ground. We do these numbers now and will watch this over 20 years. So in 20 years we have the story of our kids and families as Aboriginal people. We will look at this today and see if we can hit that target – set the target and set another one. Shoot straight. The only way is with proper research... We can change this and close the gap ourselves, our way."*

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

This is a really long story for us, for our kids and for our families. It's really hard and sad for us to see what has happened to our people.

Before colonisation we had our education and our health and work and our nations and we had peace. People were healthy and strong. No sugar, no diseases – we were really strong. We still have our ways. When we started Children's Ground, the old ways came back. If it wasn't for Children's Ground, still nothing would be happening.

This evaluation work we do is so we can see how far we have come and to really know if it's happening how we want it to. We are showing everyone that we have the solution, we have the Aboriginal way and we are making the change. We are doing it our way at Children's Ground and showing people it works. We need to show government how to do this right so we can keep going. We need this place.

At the end of our first year of delivery (2017), we looked back and decided our biggest achievement so far was ACTION. No more telling policy makers, service providers and researchers what we want to see for the future of our children and getting nothing from it. This time we are doing it ourselves.

What works and matters for our families can only be decided by our families and through our actions. This report is showing that we can do it. We are the ones that can make this change.

Before Children's Ground, we were not given the chance. Assimilation has tried to make us non-Aboriginal people. We are always reminding people of who we are and where we have come from and how strong we are. Now we can show people.

*"We are getting what we have always wanted. We just go on and on every day – not stopping."*

**Lorrayne Gorey, Senior Educator Children's Ground**

Our Elders are passing away. We need to step up. It is up to us. Our Elders are like the power for us. There is hope in our hearts and we are being strong to teach our kids so they don't keep getting lost. Their identity is everything.

This evaluation shows that our kids are proud. They are learning who they are and where they come from. They are understanding their culture. They are also learning their Western knowledge. They are getting healthy in their bodies and strong in their spirit. They are with their families, on their country, where they belong. Our families who have been struggling have found a place to work, to show their skills. We are walking together as we did before.

*"We've been going really well at Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe... I love it here. This is where my heart is. We are doing it our way. This is where the wheels are turning around. We will stay on this straight road. We are recognising the pathway forward and learning from where we've been. We all work together and walk together on the same track."*

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

Children's Ground makes us strong. We want to let everyone know about our work, about this evaluation and everything we are doing at Children's Ground. This is our place, and we need this place for us and for the future of our culture and children.

**From 'Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme'  
(Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Governance Committee)**



# From our Chairperson



Our vision at Children's Ground is for our families and children to experience justice, to feel empowered and to create change. We have designed an Approach that comes from our people. We are evaluating whether this Approach will bring the changes we are all hoping to see.

We present this report as the first evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia). First Nations leaders and families have established and grown Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe in their communities to change the future for their children and grandchildren. This evaluation shares our experiences, challenges and early achievements. This report shows the strength and grit of all our staff and families who worked tirelessly over our first few years.

This evaluation is long. It is our baseline for 25 years. We started out with very little and had to build our work slowly. This report presents how we implement Children's Ground. It presents the voice of our people. It presents the challenges and the development. It shows how we draw from our cultural knowledge systems and ensure that Western services are a central part of our work, but do not dominate. It shows how we focus our resources and efforts on upstream solutions and prevention, rather than reactive, crisis-driven, downstream responses after it is far too late.

This report presents a story of early change to the status quo for our children and families. Changes in how systems are governed, placing decision making and power in the hands of people in communities. Changes in what, how and where services are delivered - by our people where they live, bringing long awaited access to our communities. Changes in education, health and employment. We have seen these changes lead to new beginnings, a shifting of the sands and old pathways being rediscovered. This evaluation shows me that we are on the right track.

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe is educating our young kids who weren't even in the game - they weren't in any learning services, and neither were their families. Now, our kids are loving learning. What has triggered this engagement is a sense of safety and the freedom of access on their terms - not terms prescribed by others. For our people who have been systematically excluded from many Western services and systems, engagement starts small and builds. Accessibility is paramount - and central to this is cultural and physical safety. In this evaluation, families talked about feeling free and safe at Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.

With families working and leading together for their children and grandchildren, the kids are seeing their families teach, heal, work and lead. The more they see this, the more the kids know their families are part of their life and they can be counted on. Together, they are building on the power and history of our kinship and law. They are beginning to replace a history of exclusion, isolation and trauma with safety, wellbeing and genuine opportunities.

The most striking finding from this evaluation is the impact of simply respecting First Nations languages and cultures - creating genuine empowerment and active engagement in social, cultural and economic life. The same was found in the evaluation of Children's Ground in Kakadu - culture and language are drivers of change. This is not surprising to me. People are elated that their culture is being recognised with the importance and prominence it should have had years ago. People are talking tall and walking tall. This is exactly what Children's Ground is about.

When Ranger programs started, First Nations people flocked to them. It was their chance to be paid for their strengths and knowledge and care and ownership over their land. If more systems empowered people through opportunities to engage and work within their cultural knowledge systems and on their lands, people would flock to education and health services and employment.

We measure progress by counting numbers, interviewing families and monitoring changes. But we have seen something else over the first years of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe that can be hard to measure. You see the smiles on the faces of children; this is engagement, this is joy, this is feeling safe. You see the pride, enthusiasm and sense of self-worth in young people and adults every day - this is empowerment and ownership. In the past, this self worth has been lost or pushed down. Now I see it everywhere.

We are an Aboriginal community controlled and owned organisation where the communities are the bosses - and that's the difference - the community controls and owns Children's Ground. Governance and decision making are ours. We want everyone to share in the successes and challenges of achieving genuine First Nations community control in systems and services that have controlled us for far too long.

For the first time in a long time, I see hope in people's eyes. This evaluation represents that hope. It shows how hope is coming back for people. I see our families being comfortable in their surroundings at Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. I see people walking around and talking like they own the place - because they do. I see people participating, some who have never participated before. People are being employed through their participation. Employment is critical. It is self-worth, it's self-esteem, it's working towards an outcome.

We are an organisation that exists to influence systems change locally and nationally. As we continue on our 25-year journey towards generational change for children, families and whole communities, we will present public reports that evaluate our progress and document our journey. Over our first few years, we have learned a lot and we have a long way to go. What gives me hope is that we are already seeing early changes, and I am proud to present this report to you.

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





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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.*



# Glossary

<b>Arrernte language (<i>translation from English to Arrernte is not always a direct translation</i>)</b>	
Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe	Children's Ground Central Australia
Ampe akwekes	Children
Angangkere	Traditional healers
Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme	'Everyone being responsible'. This is the name of Children's Ground's First Nations Governance Committee in Central Australia.
Mparntwe	Alice Springs
There are two different names for the 'Arrernte Early Years Learning curriculum framework' and 'learning outcomes' measured against the framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Angkentye relates to speaking. The Arrernte Early Years Learning curriculum framework is speaking to what and how educators are teaching and working towards achieving with children's learning and wellbeing.</li> <li>• Akaltye relates to learning. the documentation of children's progress towards with learning and wellbeing in key cultural and Western learning outcomes.</li> </ul>
<b>Definition of key terms</b>	
Children's Ground Approach	The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is the system being implemented and evaluated over 25 years. This includes: practice principles (how we work); an integrated Learning, Wellbeing & Development service platform (what we deliver); and systemic enabling conditions (community governance, First Nations workforce development, integrated service delivery, evaluation and collective investment).
Critical mass	At least 75% of the service population.
First Nations, Arrernte, Indigenous, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	<p>Children's Ground works with a range of First Nations people from different language groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrernte is a language group and First Nation. Arrernte people initiated Children's Ground in Central Australia. Arrernte is used when it applies specifically to Arrernte people and content.</li> <li>• First Nations is used when referring to engagement in the Children's Ground Approach to reflect all participating nations.</li> <li>• Indigenous and Aboriginal &amp; Torres Strait Islander is used when these are the terms used in any external research and evidence referenced.</li> </ul>
Growth model	Gradual development of the Children's Ground Approach over time based on the resources available and with the intention to reach full scale delivery that can be sustained for 25 years.
Impact evaluation	Change and impact for children, families and communities is evaluated against the progress measures and long-term outcomes of the CG Approach.
Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform (LWD)	The Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform refers to the integrated system of learning, health and economic, community and cultural development and wellbeing. It is what is delivered in communities and is the most visible element of the CG Approach.
Money story	Income/expenditure for each year.
Ochre card	Northern Territory Working With Children Check.
Process evaluation	Process and implementation effectiveness is assessed and measured against the practice principles of the CG Approach.
Sorry business	A period of cultural protocols after a person has died.
Walk, Talk & Act (WTA) / Community Engagement & Planning (CEP)	Walk, Talk and Act (WTA) is used interchangeably with Community Engagement and Planning (CEP). This process occurs with communities to inform a formal decision by community and Children's Ground towards implementation of the full Children's Ground Approach.
<b>Abbreviations</b>	
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
AHKPI	Aboriginal Health Key Performance Indicator data
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ASR	Age-standardised rate
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
CEP	Community Engagement and Planning
CG	Children's Ground
CG-CA	Children's Ground Central Australia
CGA/CG Approach	Children's Ground Approach
ESL	English as a second language
FaFT	Families as First Teachers
LWD	Learning Wellbeing and Development
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PHIDU	Public Health Information Development Unit
WTA	Walk, Talk & Act





Executive Summary



## Introduction

Children's Ground was designed to change the status quo as a First Nations systems solution to empower communities to achieve the social, cultural and economic agency. It aims to see the next generation of children experience justice and opportunity as a norm and enjoy lifelong wellbeing. Designed to address key social and cultural determinants of First Nations children, the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is a 25-year, community-led strategy which targets key building blocks to achieve long term sustainable change. It is a comprehensive approach to addressing multiple drivers for change including empowerment and access to the high quality integrated services needed for long term opportunities and change for children and their families.

The CG Approach is a system reform agenda that encompasses:

**Five systemic areas** that create enabling conditions for change: Governance; Employment; Services; Investment; and Evidence.

**An integrated service platform:** the Learning, Wellbeing & Development platform integrates Learning & Wellbeing; Family Health & Wellbeing; Community Development & Wellbeing; Economic Development & Wellbeing; and Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing.

**Key practice principles** guide how the CG Approach works with the community: Start early; Critical mass; Child, family and community-led; Deliver the whole, not the bits; In community (place-based); Innovation - combining the best of the old and the new; Assume and celebrate ability (strengths-based); Expect and deliver excellence; and Stay for the long-term.

In each area these are designed through a First Nations lens where First Nations systems have always been integrated across generations and are based within a strong system of law and governance.

## Scope of this report

This report details the first stage implementation of the CG Approach in Central Australia (Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe). The central aim of the first three years of operation has been to build the community and family relationships, practice knowledge, service capacity and expertise needed for the CG Approach to become fully operational and sustainable in the long term.

The report details the implementation progress, learnings and initial impact of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe between 2017 and 2019. Locally collected and publicly available data set a baseline for evaluating progress and outcomes of the CG Approach over the long-term (25 years). Ensuring cultural relevance and safety, this evaluation uses quantitative and qualitative data to present a process analysis on the quality and integrity of implementation and early stage progress and impact.



## Establishing and growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia)

In 2016, after a request from Elders for Children's Ground to begin in Central Australia, Children's Ground's Board in dual governance with the Elders, decided that the CG Approach should be established in an incremental 'growth model' (see Glossary). Despite the significant risk to the integrity of the CG Approach, it was considered that delaying could mean losing Elders to guide the process, which was determined to be the greater risk.

Elders identified four communities within the Arrernte nations that were culturally connected. In January 2017, the CG Approach was established in three communities across the Central Australia region (Irrkerlantye; Mpweringke Anapipe; and Yarrenyty Arltere). In June 2019, when additional funding became available, Uyenpere Atwatye began operations. All of the participating communities form part of the greater Arrernte Nation with three being Central/Eastern Arrernte and one largely Western Arrernte. Each site was defined by its geographic area, population, community and cultural governance arrangements. This recognizes that some cross-over between Children's Ground sites can occur due to shared traditional lands, family relationships and inter-community mobility.

The plan for the growth implementation in Central Australia was developed through the initial community engagement and planning (CEP) and was tailored for each site with a focus on:

- Establishing strong local governance
- Continuing community engagement and planning
- Establishing operations in four communities identified by Elders
- Prioritising early learning and wellbeing (cultural and Western), nutrition, community governance and some local First Nations employment
- Building resources to develop and grow the other areas of the integrated service platform as well as embedding cultural practices and knowledge through their operations
- Building towards actively engaging with a critical mass (at least 75%) of children and their families - measured against the family and community population mapping undertaken with community leaders



From 2017 to 2019, the CG Approach increased in available resources and subsequently in delivery, engagement and First Nations leadership. The table below shows the growth over time by each service area of the integrated Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform. See Sections 'Introduction' and 'Growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe in Central Australia' for more information about the growth model in the context of the full CG Approach.

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					

## Evaluation method and baseline

This evaluation reports on process effectiveness and early change and impact against key practice principles (intent) and short-term progress measures towards nine long-term outcomes within Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework – outcomes for children, families and communities. This evaluation drew on findings from: daily delivery data, interviews and surveys with families, staff and local services, government administrative data, ABS and other available data.

**Principles and governance:** In line with participatory approaches and the key principles of Children's Ground's First Nations leadership, Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance) was directly involved in the design of the evaluation framework from a First Nations perspective. It has also provided leadership in data collection processes, data analysis and reporting. Special emphasis was given to ensuring that the voices of First Nations families (i.e. their direct quotes) were heard and accurately reported as evidence.

Western trained evaluators worked in partnership with the governance group and local First Nations evaluators in all aspects of the evaluation.

Evaluation and reporting were also overseen by a national Research Advisory Group, consisting of experts in academic, community and systems research and evaluation.

**Baseline community profiles and data:** Before beginning the CG Approach in Central Australia, a community engagement and planning process (CEP), referred to as Walk Talk & Act, was undertaken from April-December 2016. From this, baseline community profiles were established for each community. These described the existing community circumstances and needs regarding: Language and cultural transmission; Geography and location issues; Local governance arrangements; Children's learning and wellbeing; School access and engagement; Clinical health access; Economic wellbeing; and Community development and infrastructure. Coupled with the family reported worries and aspirations for their children and communities, these provided an important qualitative baseline against which progress can be assessed over time.

**Progress measures:** Children's Ground's longitudinal outcomes evaluation framework includes defined long-term outcomes and short and medium-term indicators of progress towards these outcomes (see Section: About this evaluation). The short-term progress indicators are focused on children and families establishing equitable access to and engagement in services, supports and opportunities as key building blocks for sustained change and impact. This information is collected by Children's Ground. The medium and longer-term progress indicators focus on impact indicators and include comparative data from other publicly available official sources.

*"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



# Key findings: Early change and impact

## Engagement in the Children's Ground Approach



### Children (0-8 years)

- A new cohort of children (245) engaged in early years learning. These children had rarely or never engaged, with only 14% previously engaged in early learning
- A critical mass (82%) of children engaged in cultural and Western early years learning
- A majority of children progressed in their cultural and Western learning
- All children engaged in early years learning alongside their family – many for the first time
- 100% of children engaged in health promotion integrated in all early learning sessions
- A majority of families reported improvements in children's physical and emotional wellbeing

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

"Kids are learning counting, cutting, shapes, sizes, gluing – it's a lot better now."

"She [daughter] used to talk in English and whisper in Arrernte – now she talks proud in both."

"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."

"The little ones know their country. Mums know their skin names now – they know how to address everyone in the family. Kids and adults are learning this every day at Children's Ground and at home now."

"Culture makes kids who they really are. It's hard for them to do mainstream and learn culture late."

"We need to stay for generations, the little ones are our generations. They are our future. They're our leaders. Soon, they're going to be leaders, you know. Leading the way."

### Families (young people 9-17 years and adults 18+ years)

- 59 First Nations people were employed at Children's Ground
- People who previously lived with chronic unemployment are working – 84% were not working when they started at Children's Ground and 34% had never worked
- 562 family members of all ages engaged in family/community celebrations and events
- 100% of families reported increased activities and opportunities for children and families to spend time together – with families walking alongside their children
- 487 family members have engaged in learning and health promotion alongside their children
- 100% of families/staff reported increased access to services for physical and emotional health and wellbeing

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

"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."

"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."

"We've got the voice to talk, we are the cultural people. We're leading the way and then we know where to get families. We know where the family lives and where their connection is."

"Families feel proud. No one has ever done that for us before."

### Communities (people of all ages)

- In total, 978 people of all ages engaged in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia)
- Increased family and community empowerment in local decision-making
- 63% of families/staff reported feeling safe, comfortable or free at Children's Ground (without being directly asked about feelings of safety)
- Young people and adults have been learning their language and culture alongside children.
- Next generation cultural and community leaderships has strengthened
- Growing cultural, social and economic opportunities in communities

"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."



# First Nations findings and analysis

**This analysis is from Children's Ground's First Nations staff. The painting depicts the CG Approach from an Arrernte perspective. The meaning of each element of the painting can be found in Section: About this evaluation.**

*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.*

**Tyerrtye Arrernte mapele iwerre ineme. Anwerne angkentyele ileme nthakenhe mpwaretyeke. Arrpenhele ilyetyeke arrangkwe. Anwerne apurte-irremele decision mpwareme, tyerrtye mape akwethe ankeme community-ke ante itne ileme involved-irretyeke. Anwerne apurte-irremele alakenhe mpwareme. Anwernenhe 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 atyeperre 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 ankemele 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.*





"I know a lot of little children that come here... I think little children have changed. They seem more healthier than when they first started. I've noticed changes in all the little ones."

**"Kids are putting words together – used to be all in English. Now they learn with English and Arrernte."**

"Language won't be learned on a blackboard – we teach them how they need to learn."

**"They are learning about health – nose blowing, washing hands... I can see them learning. They have songs with these things – they are singing them all the time, at home too."**

"Families are really proud to be supporting and teaching kids. Family are learning at the same time."

**"I see family teaching the little ones in our way and they don't get that at school."**

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

**"It's great to be listened to and valued."**

"It's giving them kids a good example about you can't be sitting over there and drinking and smoking dope and stuff like that. You've got to have somewhere you can have space and where you can do your job, work."

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

"I feel strong. All good now. Everybody together and involved and we can connect with other family and make decisions together. This is how we all get in touch now – at Children's Ground."

**"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."**

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

**"I didn't even know how to read and write in Arrernte... We're getting more support from Elders just being here. I'm learning to write in Arrernte and greet in Arrernte and read... because I didn't have that growing up."**

## Systems change: Implementation progress and fidelity

The full CG Approach requires each element of systems, service and practice reform to be fully functional to achieve sustained change over a generation. While the growth model was largely implemented effectively and as intended, process fidelity and integrity against the full model CG Approach was not achieved. This evaluation shows that full implementation is yet to be achieved with strengthening required in key areas of place-based delivery, achieving standards of excellence, increased local service collaboration and resources for full operational delivery and sustainability - to 'stay for the longterm'. Nevertheless, considerable progress was achieved in establishing the critical foundational elements of the Approach; this enabled early change and impact for children and families.

A key evaluation finding of the CG Approach growth model in Central Australia confirms findings from the Kakadu West Arnhem evaluation of Children's Ground - that reform in one area of services, systems and practice alone will not create systems change and is subsequently unlikely to achieve sustained change in outcomes. This evaluation confirms previous evidence that the key drivers of early impact and change are: the interconnectedness of the CG Approach; the authorising environments of the integrated service delivery platform; the strengths and culturally-based delivery in community; and local empowerment.

This evaluation found that child and family engagement in early learning was enabled by wrap around support that reduced access barriers. Ongoing engagement was stimulated through 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 and culturally-based, relational and respectful learning environments. Universal integration of health promotion in early learning increased health knowledge and literacy of children and their families together. For some families, this health integration, coupled with targeted health promotion and support, resulted in visible health behaviour change at Children's Ground and in home environments. This was also due to high levels of family engagement in learning alongside children and grandchildren - a 'rule' identified from the beginning by First Nations governance.

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 only 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 recognition of cultural expertise alongside Western expertise created the conditions for innovation and change.

The strengths-based implementation and First Nations 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 has also facilitated family-to-family engagement and intergenerational environments that are owned by the families and communities.

Establishing in-community, place-based delivery over the first years of implementation provided early experiences of physical and cultural safety in services in communities. It also enabled increased activity, delivery and opportunities locally to grow the social, cultural and economic capital within communities over time.

In line with Western research evidence, the CG Approach has been evidenced as effectively implementing the foundations of systems, service and practice reform that are the building blocks for long-term change: systems and delivery that are holistic, integrated, community governed, place-based and strengths-based.

In line with First Nations cultural protocols, the CG Approach has been evidenced as providing the space and mechanisms that enable culturally-based governance, decision-making, teaching, learning, health and wellbeing for children and families - all within intergenerational environments that are central to the approaches within First Nations culture. Cultural authority in design created a protective factor from racism and exclusion from services and systems.

## Conclusions

Children's Ground sets out to create the conditions for a different life experience for the current generation of children and to achieve whole of community, long term change. From these first years of implementing the CG Approach, day-to-day life looks different for the children of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. While this cannot be considered sustained change, it is a positive beginning to a 25-year journey.

The changes for children have been mobilised by their families and communities and through their cultures and languages. Access to First Cultural and Western educational and health promotion services and to employment has been achieved, moving toward equity. Culturally led and responsive design and delivery have minimised racism and created cultural security for children and their families. The drivers and enablers of achieving early impact of high levels of child and family engagement were the practice principles and structures and systems at local and organisational levels.

Based on national and international research, the conditions to achieve long term outcomes for children are being established by Children's Ground.

This evaluation demonstrates that the CG Approach can be scaled to diverse contexts. When the key principles underpinning the Approach are implemented with integrity, either at full scale as in Kakadu or through a growth model as in Central Australia, they enable empowerment, access and equity in services.





Section One:

# Introduction



The CG Approach was designed from decades of work and leadership by First Nations people in Central Australia. Children's Ground was incubated by the Australian Government in 2011 as an innovative approach to systems reform focused on achieving long term outcomes for First Nations people. The vision of Children's Ground is for all First Nations people to achieve their aspirations for their children to enjoy a life of opportunity, strong cultural identity and personal wellbeing by having voice and agency over their social, cultural, political and economic future.

The core strategy is to implement, demonstrate and evidence the CG Approach. The aim of the Approach is to address key social, cultural and economic determinants to ensure every child born in a community today can enjoy a life of opportunity and wellbeing where they live.

It is a First Nations systems solution to achieve life-long wellbeing and end intergenerational inequity and complex disadvantage. Through evidence and leading practice, the aim is to achieve systems reform for the benefit of all First Nations people.

With Arrernte communities at the forefront of the design of the CG Approach, the first efforts to operationalise the Approach occurred in Alice Springs in 2012. Despite local Arrernte leadership and community will, a lack of funding and Government commitment meant that it was necessary to postpone implementation. At the time, the Board decided sufficient funds were needed for implementation of the full CG Approach.

From 2013-2017, through funding from the Kakadu West Arnhem Trust and the Australian Government, the full CG Approach was established in Kakadu West Arnhem with implementation and evaluation occurring over a three-and-a-half-year period. Due to external events, operations in Kakadu ceased and community leaders relocated Children's Ground to remote West Arnhem Land.

The evaluation of the [CG Approach in Kakadu West Arnhem](#) is Children's Ground's proof on concept.

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 authority of Elders is highly recognised within Children's Ground's governance and leadership. Elders have a critical role in ensuring the cultural integrity of the organisation and its operations.

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

Children's Ground has a dual governance model that recognises both corporate and First Nations governance. The organisation has majority First Nations membership on the Western legal board which drives national strategy and corporate compliance. First Nations Cultural governance operates in tandem and with authority at a community level, to drive design, strategy, delivery and cultural compliance of the organisation.

The Children's Ground Board was concerned that limited funding posed a significant threat to the integrity of the CG Approach. However, the risk of losing Elders was considered higher. So, at the recommendation of cultural and community Elders, Children's Ground returned to Alice Springs in 2016. The Board, through dual governance with Elders, decided that Children's Ground would establish a 'growth model' with four communities in Central Australia.

The CG Approach is fully modelled and costed for comprehensive, place based delivery in communities where people live, and according to their design and vision for their children, families and whole community. When funding to deliver full CG Approach is not available, the 'growth model' is implemented. This requires the gradual development of 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.

This evaluation reports the early implementation of the CG Approach from 2017 to 2019. During this time, Ampekenhe Ahelhe undertook a staged implementation of the CG Approach, growing each year as funding increased over the period. This report provides an analysis of how the CG Approach was established and developed over the period and early-stage progress and impact, including:

- A developmental process analysis
- A baseline for the longitudinal 25-year evaluation
- Early impact in progress measures towards long term change

The report is presented in four sections:

- **Section 1:** Introduction
- **Section 2:** Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia)
- **Section 3:** Evaluation findings and analysis
- **Section 4:** Analysis and discussion

The release of the report has been delayed due to COVID-19 causing the disruption to the time required for genuine First Nations leadership and engagement in data analysis and reporting.



## The Children's Ground Approach

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

The CG Approach is a 25-year strategy. Led at the community level, the CG Approach addresses the key social, cultural and economic determinants to support generational change. This requires always working with children, alongside their family and community, as shown in Figure 1. This is referred to throughout the evaluation report and is central to the CG Approach.

Local leadership and governance are backed by resources for high-quality learning, health and employment that is culturally responsive and focuses on the child, their family and their community.

The CG Approach is not a service to people; it is part of the community. It frontloads resources into equitable access and prevention and is an approach that builds the social, cultural and economic capital where children live, building upon a history of resilience. It recognises that children, families and communities who need the most, deserve the best - that they are the experts in their own lives and that their voice and talent are critical to creating change.

As seen in Figure 2, the CG Approach includes three key components:

- Principles
- Integrated Services platform
- Systems – enabling conditions for change

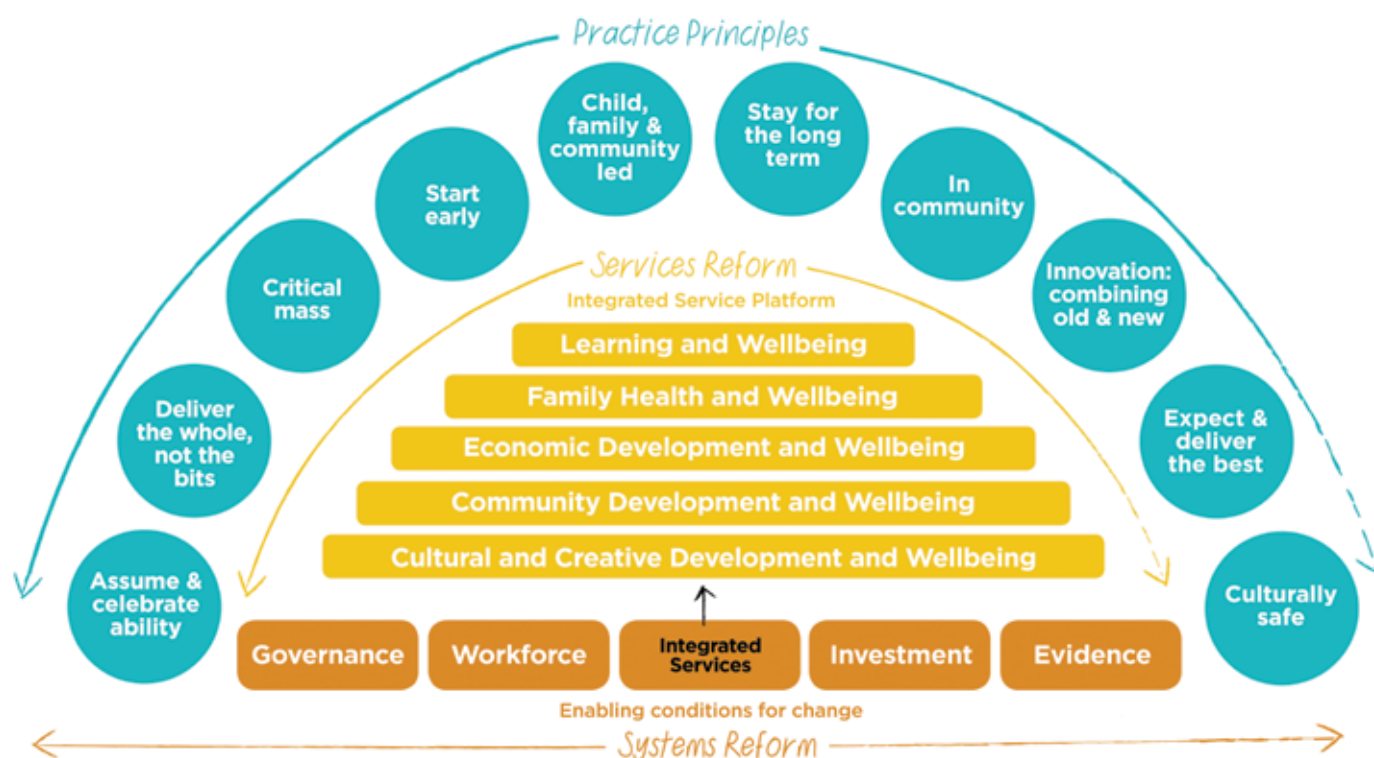
### Children's Ground vision:

*For First Nations families to realise their aspirations for the next generation of children and families to have agency over their social, cultural, political and economic future.*

**Figure 1: Child, Family and Community together**



**Figure 2: The Children's Ground Approach**



See Appendix 1 for more detail and 'What' and 'How' services are delivered.

The analysis in this evaluation will consider the interconnectedness between the three components of the CG Approach (system, service, practice) within the context of Central Australia implementing the Approach over time as a growth model.

# About this evaluation



## Evaluation outcomes frameworks

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

This first evaluation of 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 Ethics Research Committee, facilitated by the Centre for Remote Health in Central Australia. The evaluation method, data analysis and report have been oversighted by Children's Ground's 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 in Appendix 9.

## 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 Ahelhe<sup>2</sup>.

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.

<sup>2</sup> Painting design: Jane Davis and Amunda Gorey (2011). Painting interpretation: Jane Davis (2011) and Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia) Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance).



**Semi-circle shapes:** In the middle and all over this painting these represent *ilthe/apmere* which means home, where we live - our land, country and community. We make this a safe place for everyone.

**Little curved shapes:** These are people. The larger shapes are adults, the smaller shapes are children. The curved pictures with the hats represent male Elders. The curved pictures with scarfs are female Elders. They are all within that home, within that community, and in Children's Ground. Connected as one across generations. The old people are standing behind the young people - we are all being led and taught by the old people. When new babies are born, they are in the middle. With the whole family watching, caring and teaching. We are all responsible for each child - to look after each child for everything they need - their mind, their spirit, their body and all their knowledge.

**Star-like shape:** This is a fire, with the people sitting around it. Kids and families are learning and sharing around the fire - like we have done for so long. Elders are teaching our kids and young people, with the families all together - always working together. Families are sharing culture and showing children who they are, where they come from and where they belong.

**Four blue half circles with people:** These are kids, families and Elders in each area - all the Children's Ground communities. They are within their own traditional lands and communities - but are all together too. We connect within our communities and with other communities. This is bringing everyone together. Everyone watching over the children. Everyone leading Children's Ground for our children.

**Footprints:** They are coming in and out - children and all families and communities interacting with each other - sharing, caring and together. That is one of the most important things about Children's Ground - the interactions.

The footprints are us always looking back and following the Ancestors in our teaching and learning. The footprints always return to our country.

We are creating the footprints with the children so they can build the life they want. Wherever they live they might have their own children and begin the cycle again. This will stop them from living the hardship we have now.

Footprints mean we don't stay in one small place and Children's Ground is not in one place. It is in the community, the home and out bush - it is anywhere learning can happen, where the child's learning, health and life can be strengthened. These places will be safe for everyone. When our children are taken to places where they can learn in their way then they can focus.

**Four outer circles:** These are children when they become adults - graduated students from Children's Ground with a good future. They will have a choice. They have had all those experiences and the knowledge they have gathered through Children's Ground. This will mean they have real choices. They will have the opportunity to get jobs in different places - it could be in their own community, or anywhere in Australia or overseas. Each circle is like a choice, an option - work, study, family, leader. We want our kids to be part of the world. Their footprints always come back to country. They know where they belong.

**Black spaces.** This is where we all work together. It is where male and female Elders and communities work together - where everyone works together because everything and everyone is connected to the land - where our country stops, someone else's starts - our kids need to know all the stories. It is also about us working with people outside of Children's Ground. We are sharing what we are doing at Children's Ground - with other communities and with people outside of Children's Ground.

**Little half circles facing out:** These are the funders and partners of Children's Ground. They have their backs towards the centre to show that they are not controlling us but supporting us. The funding and support is coming into the community and we have a responsibility to them. We give back information about what is happening in our community, sharing who we are, showing the changes in learning, health and life of our children, families and communities. Our partners are a part of Children's Ground we all work together.

**White lines:** These are connecting everything and all of us. It is us standing strong with each other for our children. We are supporting each other. Our communities will strengthen for everyone. We will continue learning and growing together forever.

**Blue and white dots and yellow curves:** These are the knowledge - the teaching and learning travelling around (in homes/communities and Children's Ground). Within Children's Ground we have two-way learning - led by us. Children are learning First Nations language and culture and Western language and culture. Whatever we teach our kids, we want it to be the best in a way they will learn and grow and succeed. We will have high standards for all of our teachers and workers. First Nations and Western. We will surround the kids with everything they need - for their health, their spirit, their knowledge. We will do this for all kids, with families walking alongside them.

The picture also shows the ownership. The families and communities have ownership of Children's Ground through all that *impatye*, all those footprints. We focus on keeping the centre and core strong and functional for the little ones - it's their foundation, their language and their culture. If we don't have those strong pathways our kids can't go anywhere.

Everyone around the outside can support us, but we must start and stay with the Elders as we grow. We celebrate our children, our culture, our knowledge, our Elders, our young people, our families. Everyone has a story. Our kids will grow up proud, not lost.

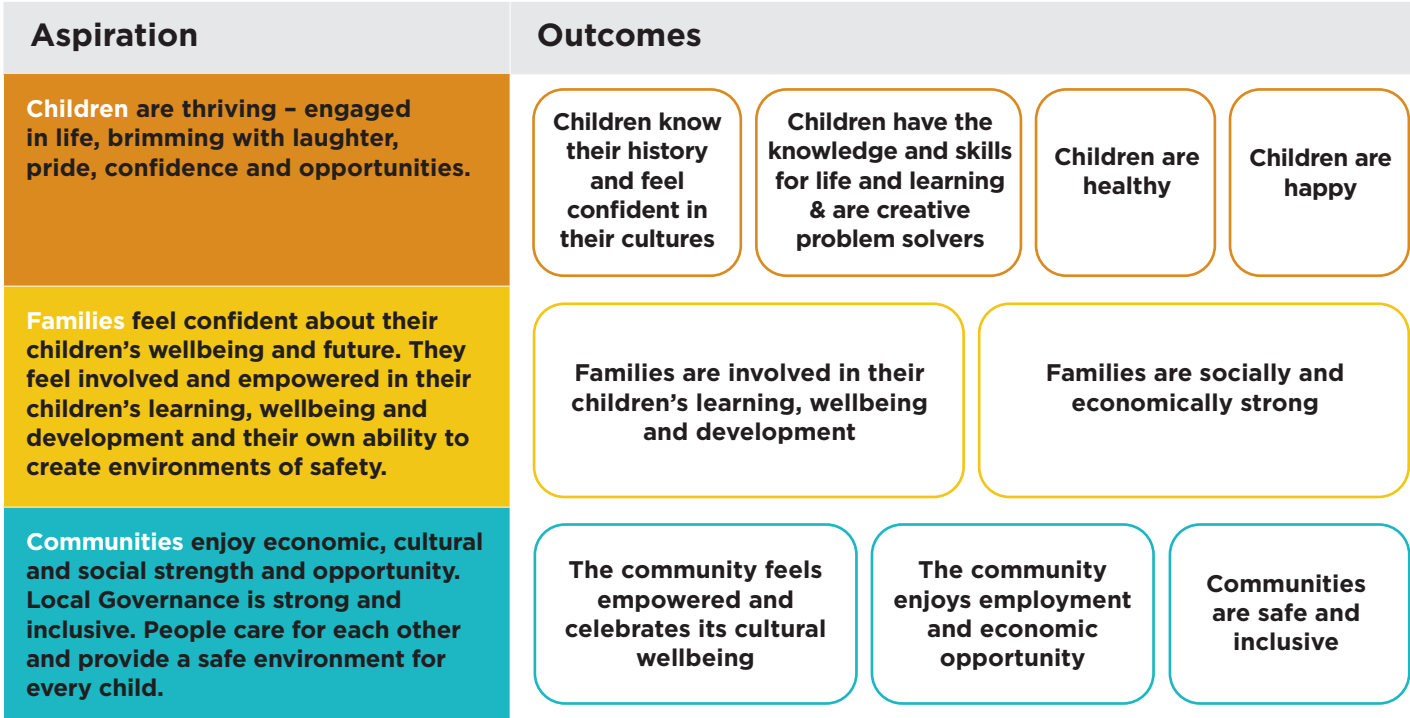




Western Evaluation Framework

The 25-year longitudinal evaluation framework has nine long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community, outlined in Figure 3. Progress indicators are attached to each outcome to measure change and impact over 25-years of the CG Approach (see Appendix 2).

Figure 3: Children’s Ground longitudinal evaluation framework



Designed as a whole of community approach, the aim is to walk with the majority, ‘a critical mass’ (at least 75%) of children and their families within a community. The assumption is that when enough children in a community are enabled to enjoy high quality education, positive health and wellbeing, and equity in life opportunities into adulthood, whole communities currently experiencing complex and entrenched intergenerational disadvantage can become communities that experience wellbeing and opportunity - culturally, economically, socially and politically.

Method

Children’s Ground recognises that evaluation undertaken ‘on’ First Nations people by non-First Nations people has significant risk of cultural bias that can contribute to ongoing harm. Therefore, key principles that guide evaluation processes include:

- First Nations people own and control data and evaluation about them and on their country
- Trust and respect
- Community leadership and participation from end to end
- Local context and knowledge must be privileged
- Creating knowledge together through combined First Nations and Western practice
- Knowledge into action and impact, ensuring what we learn is used to improve lives
- Only undertake evaluation that is of benefit to the participants and communities/groups
- Rigour and quality that ensures evaluation meets accountability and standards endorsed by Western and First Nations expert Advisory Groups



It should be noted that evaluation within the context of what can sometimes be termed ‘wicked social issues’ will necessarily be reductive. This is particularly true within the First Nations context, where the impact of colonisation manifests in a complexity that is difficult to measure. Translating or interpreting the cultural and linguistic perspective of First Nations people is fraught with cultural bias. While significant measures are taken by Children’s Ground to minimise this risk, it continues to exist.

The evaluation has been undertaken within a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. PAR respects the knowledge and experience of local people and provides them with agency over research and evaluation processes. It is a collaborative approach where Western trained evaluators work in partnership with local First Nations evaluators to design, undertake and report on implementation of the CG Approach. Operation of the PAR approach for this evaluation is described further in this section under the heading ‘Arrernte leadership in evaluation’.



This evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection tools and data included:

- Internal participation and administrative tools (data represents 978 First Nations participants and staff who engaged with Children's Ground from 2017-19, including frequent or infrequent visitors)
- Structured and semi structured face-to-face evaluation interviews and focus groups:
  - Interviews with 27 First Nations leaders, family members and staff
  - Focus groups with 17 Western-trained staff
  - Interviews and focus groups with six practitioners from six local services/organisations
- Anonymous online evaluation questionnaires with:
  - 23 Children's Ground staff (14 First Nations and nine non-First Nations)
  - Six local service providers
- Children's Ground's 'Previous employment survey', completed by 50 First Nations staff
- Children's Ground 25-year baseline evaluation 'Story of Change' survey, completed by 49 First Nations family/community members<sup>3</sup>
- Learning and wellbeing progress summaries (70 children aged 0-8 years), completed by cultural and Western educators in late 2019
- ABS Census data (Data sets: employment, education, health, population, etc)
- External administrative data sets from Northern Territory Government Departments of Education, Health and Police, Fire and Emergency (using publicly available data only - see below in data notes)

First Nations family and community voices (quotes) are presented extensively throughout this report as evidence. This is part of Children's Ground's commitment to ensuring that First Nations voices and perspectives are privileged and accurately represented. Quotes labelled anonymously as 'First Nations family/staff member' came from evaluation interviews. Quotes with names attributed did not come from evaluation interviews or data collection.

See Appendix 3 for data notes in relation to: Data by key age groups; Challenges with being denied Northern Territory Government and local clinical health administrative data; Challenges with sourcing consistent publicly available data; Developing internal population data; Evaluation questionnaire denominators.



### Arrernte leadership in evaluation

First Nations leaders and staff have been involved in monitoring and evaluation from the outset. Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme was involved in leading the design of the local evaluation framework, data collection tools, data collection, data reviews, data analysis and reporting for this evaluation.

*"This is something we've never had before: data collection being done by our families. We know the background of where these children come from. You've got to know them – what they're really like – so you can see how they're going to learn."*

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

To analyse the data for this report from a First Nations perspective, six data analysis sessions were undertaken with the participation of 24 First Nations staff and leaders.

To introduce the evaluation sessions with First Nations staff, William Tilmouth (Children's Ground's Co-founder and Chair of the Board) shared the following:

The group was asked to consider and discuss what the numbers and stories were saying about how Children's Ground is working for First Nations children, families and communities from a First Nations perspective.

At the first session, the group discussed what it meant to be an Aboriginal person and the key cultural practices and knowledge systems in relation to land, language, kinship and law. They used a graphic - a Western depiction of 'culture' from M.K. Turner's book 'What it Means to be an Aboriginal Person'. Their notes from this discussion were then used as the group undertook the analysis of evaluation numbers and stories (quantitative and qualitative data).

<sup>3</sup> In 2020 Children's Ground partnered with The Interplay Project to undertake a population baseline survey focused on key areas that families want to see change for their children. Using The Interplay Project's validated survey questions, baseline evaluation data was collected with First Nations families across Town Camps and other areas in Alice Springs.





First Nations analysis sessions included:

**Analysis of quantitative data from 2017 to 2019:**

For each year, the group discussed and analysed data about the number of people (by key age groups) engaged in learning, health promotion and wellbeing support, employment, governance and Children's Ground delivery. They also reviewed the 'money story' (income/ expenditure) for each year.

**Analysis of qualitative interview data from 2019:**

The group reviewed, discussed and interpreted de-identified qualitative data from evaluation interviews with First Nations families and staff. For each qualitative statement/response, they discussed *'What the person was saying about Children's Ground'*, and if they were saying *'it is working well or not'*.

**Mapping key influences and current conditions:**

As a baseline and context activity, the group identified current influences, conditions and policies that impact the daily lives of First Nations children, families and communities. For example, instances of grief/loss, sorry business, community conflict, historical and intergenerational trauma and policy/political influences.

**Thematic analysis within the Arrernte evaluation framework:**

Over two sessions, the group reviewed the notes taken from the analysis sessions and undertook a process of grouping their analysis into key themes that connected to the Arrernte evaluation framework (painting). This included reviewing their analysis from the first two sessions, where at the end of each day they were asked, *'What are the most important findings from today?'*

**Final analysis and confirmation:** When the Western report sections were finalised, the group reviewed their analysis and decided where and how they would like it presented throughout the report.

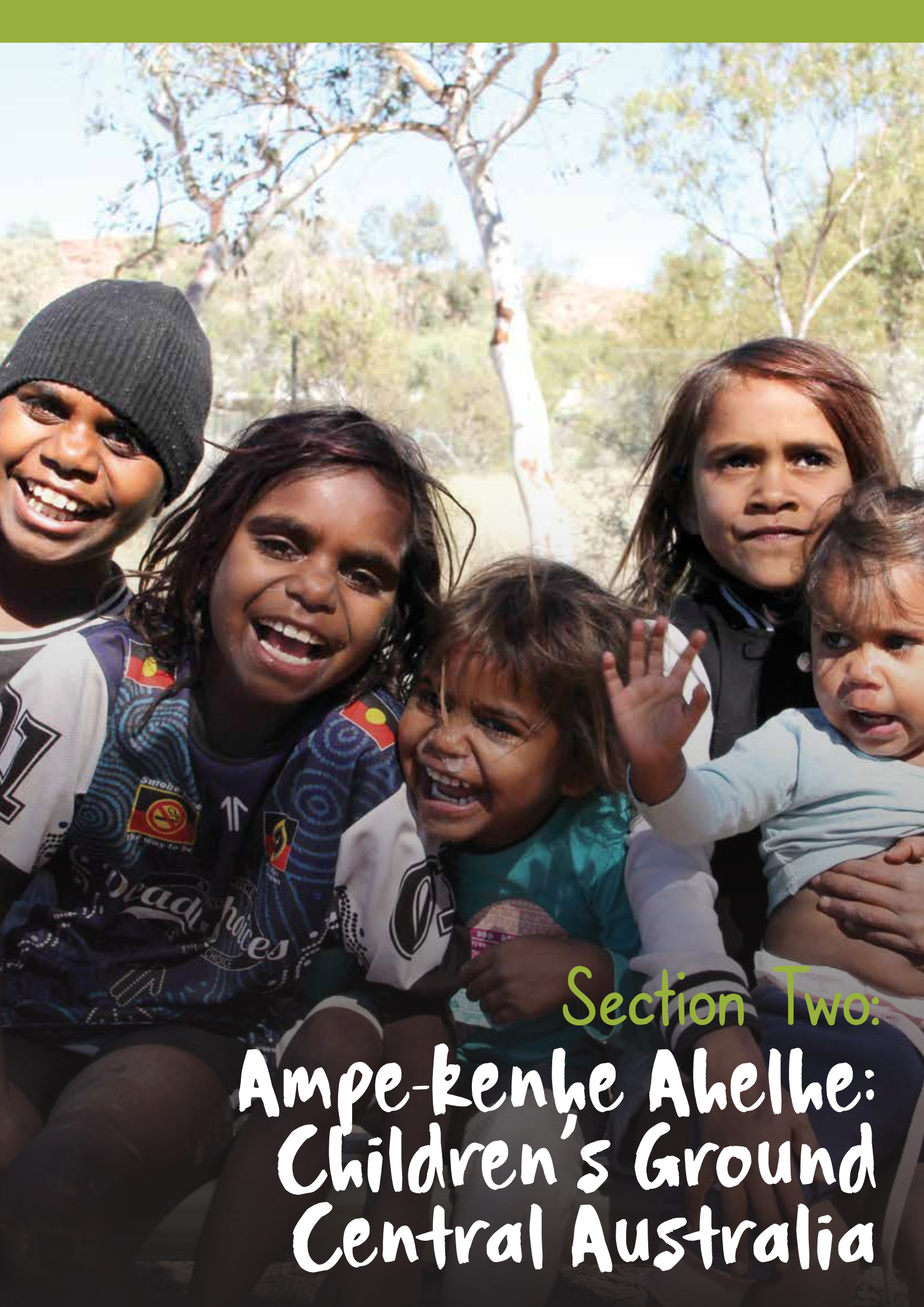
Throughout the latter analysis sessions, the groups decided to have an Arrernte analysis section (alongside the Western analysis).

In the First Nations analysis section, a series of key analysis themes are presented in Arrernte, alongside the approximate English translation. The remainder of the analysis is presented in English and has been taken directly from First Nations analysis sessions.

Translating large amounts of English text into Arrernte can be challenging and time consuming within Western concepts. As Children's Ground continues to build towards embedding First Nations evaluation methods, analysis can be undertaken in First Nations ways and languages and presented in first language. This will sit alongside Western methods and approaches presented in English.

Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme has reviewed this evaluation report. Governance members have written their foreword and approved the report for release.





Section Two:  
Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe:  
Children's Ground  
Central Australia



# Establishing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe

The implementation of a 'growth model' presented a new operational context for Children's Ground. The capacity to deliver against the Approach grew each year, however the full Approach is yet to be operationalised. Monitoring and evaluation continues to be undertaken against the evaluation framework; progress milestones were adjusted to reflect operations and development.

When Arrernte Elders in Central Australia asked to establish Children's Ground with their families and communities, they identified four communities where the CG Approach should be delivered. The communities were selected based on the original community engagement and planning process in 2012, traditional ownership of Alice Springs and cultural authority of Elders (see community geography in Figure 4).

The four communities are:

- **Irrkerlantye** (Whitegate Town Camp) – home to some of the recognised Traditional Owners of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) through both customary and Native Title law
- **Mpweringke Anapipe** – the traditional lands of some of the Elders and their children. The region includes eight outstations/homelands north of Alice Springs. Elders' initial focus was on Corkwood Bore and Sandy Bore given their cultural authority, with their kinship responsibilities also including the interest of other outstations including Burt Creek, Gillen Bore, 16 Mile, Black Tank, Snake Well, Harry's Creek and McGrath's Dam
- **Yarrenyty Arltere** (Larapinta Town Camp) – site of initial community planning and design in 2012 and part of Mparntwe
- **Uyenpere Atwatye** (Hidden Valley Town Camp)<sup>4</sup> – site of initial community planning and design in 2012 and part of Mparntwe

Each location has unique demographics and contexts. All are part of the greater Arrernte Nation with three locations being Central/Eastern Arrernte and one location being largely Western Arrernte. Each is treated as its own site with its own geographic boundary, population and community/cultural governance. Each come together to provide overarching cultural governance to Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia). At times, there is cross-community engagement in Children's Ground through shared traditional lands, family relationships and mobility.



## Walk, Talk & Act

The Community Engagement and Planning (Walk, Talk & Act) phase from 2011-12 was re-invigorated in July 2016 following initial discussions and direction from key Arrernte Elders (see Figure 5 for an overview of Children's Ground's community engagement and planning phase).

Walk, Talk & Act was directed by senior Arrernte Elders and Law women: M.K. Turner, Mrs L. Palmer, Therese Ryder, Mrs. Abbott and key next generation leaders including Felicity Hayes, Traditional Custodian of Mparntwe (Alice Springs). As part of the 'Act' component, a part time Western trained early childhood educator supported the delivery of early learning sessions alongside a small team of local First Nations staff and a volunteer.

From April to December 2016, the team engaged with cultural and community leaders and talked with families about their aspirations, worries for their children and the CG Approach. Conversations occurred at family and community meetings both inside and outside of working hours and during the delivery of early learning sessions.

A total of 287 people engaged in the Walk, Talk & Act phase. Of this, 187 people engaged in early years language and culture activities – this included 84 children 0-8 years (of which only one was engaged in formal or other early childhood education). An additional 100 community members met with staff and the governance group to learn about and discuss Children's Ground.

Key priorities included building relationships, working alongside local cultural authorities to establish the governance structures for Children's Ground, beginning local family mapping and talking with other stakeholders.

Arrernte law defines key authorities for areas of land. In Alice Springs, across the Town Camps<sup>5</sup> this is complex as there are many families and Nations now living in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Elders determined that recognition of each community area was important and leadership for each community decided to work together to establish Children's Ground in Central Australia. The joint governance entity created is Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme.

Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme and the Children's Ground Board made the decision to begin operations in three communities. Members of a fourth community would participate in existing activities until its own operations could be established as resources increased. A five-year strategic and operational plan for implementation of the CG Approach in Central Australia was established for the region and each community.

<sup>4</sup> Note: In 2020 it was identified that the Arrernte name for Hidden Valley Town Camp (Uyenper Atwatye) used for decades in Central Australia has been spelt incorrectly. Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme agreed that spellings used at Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe should align with the recently updated Arrernte Dictionary and thus First Nations leaders at Children's Ground have corrected the spelling to Uyenpere Atwatye – which is used throughout this report.

<sup>5</sup> Town Camps are Aboriginal communities historically scattered around the fringes of Alice Springs – with growth some town camps are in the township. The term 'Town Camps' uses capital letters because they are defined populations and geographies and experience working with people in these areas has demonstrated 'Town Campers' has become an identity for many living in these areas.



Figure 4: Children's Ground operational areas, sites and communities

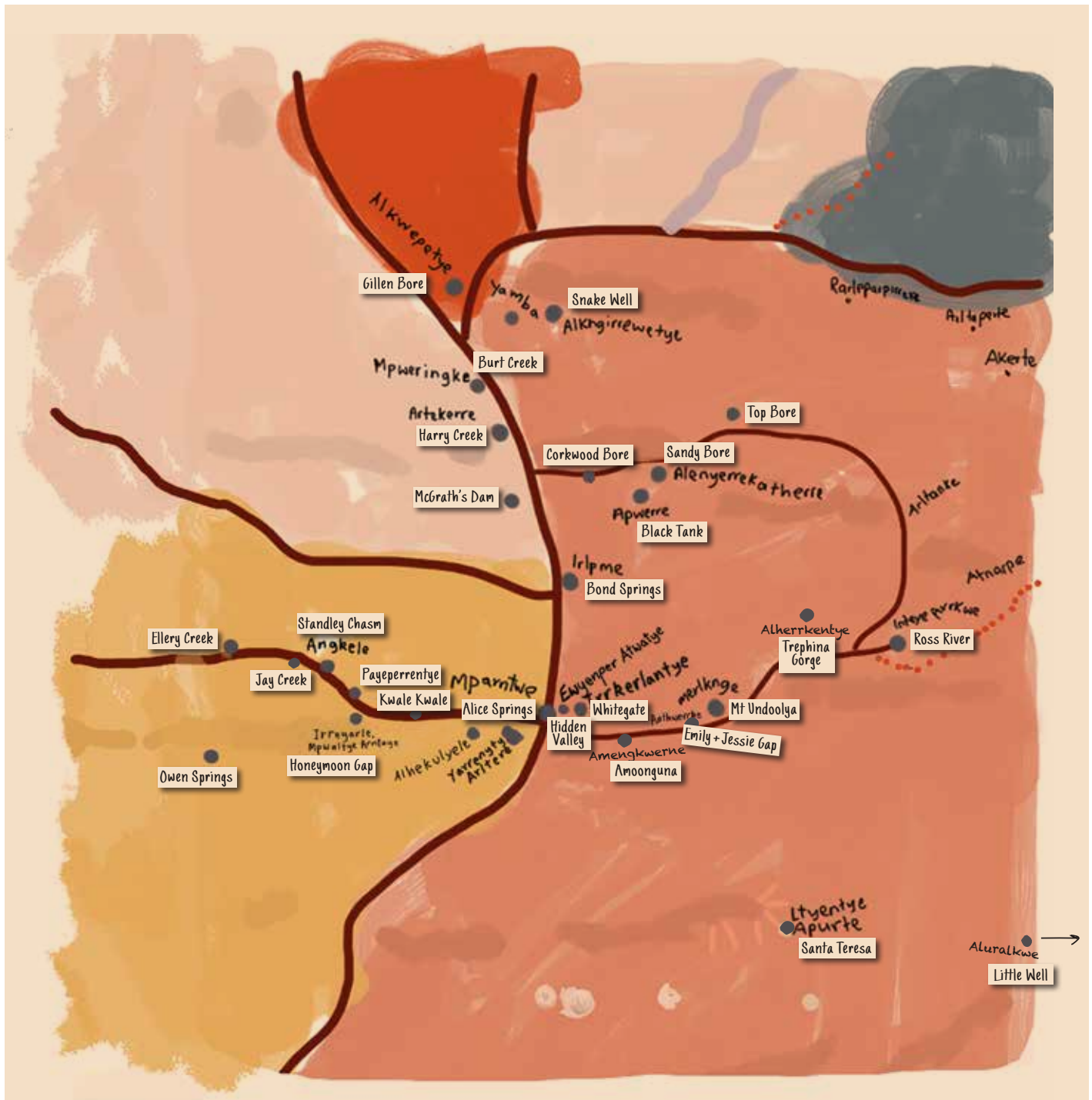


Figure 5: Children's Ground's Community Engagement &amp; Planning

At Children's Ground, Community Engagement and Planning is also known as Walk, Talk and Act. The approach is:

- **Tailored** to each community and what would work best in each location
- **Led by Aboriginal people** from within, or known to, the community in people's first language where possible
- **Family and community oriented**, involving some larger meetings as well as smaller family-by-family discussions in people's homes and across the community
- **Inclusive**, aiming to engage with every household in the community
- **Active** in the delivery of early childhood activities undertaken with local residents as a point of engagement, response to need, and planning of operations and delivery of strategic platform



# Baseline data and community profiles



This section presents the baseline for the Central Australian region drawing on findings from Children's Ground's Walk, Talk & Act and internal baseline data collected by Children's Ground. External administrative and publicly available data is presented in Appendix 4 to provide a regional baseline snapshot and context before 2017 (or as close as possible) against Children's Ground's key indicators for long-term change.

Across the external administrative data sets, there are inconsistent years and geographic boundaries which has been a significant challenge in collating the data. While this data cannot be used for evaluation purposes or comparative analysis during our progress evaluations, it provides a baseline for the region against which we will monitor change over 25 years.

There are challenges with establishing a baseline specific to Children's Ground communities. Utility of administrative data such as census data has been historically challenging due to geographic, language and cultural barriers. Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe operates in small communities where external administrative data sets are difficult to access, are often not accurate in terms of population representation or do not exist. There are understandable limitations of data for small geographic areas. However, it raises a significant systems issue in terms of national, robust community level monitoring and evaluation and, in turn, policy and practice.

For this report, there has been limited public access to key health, education and justice data sets. There is a lack of high quality local administrative data especially for small areas in which Children's Ground is working. In addition, no culturally based data is routinely collected in external administrative systems. There is broad cultural, linguistic and geographic diversity across the First Nations of Australia. Cultural perspectives in relation to governance, health, education, economy and law vary markedly from Western perspectives. In Australia, there has been very little research, evidence or data collected through First Nations perspectives to date.

To undertake meaningful analysis at local levels, Children's Ground works with communities to collect data to build the baseline and evidence base over time.

## Learning & Wellbeing



- 14% of children had engaged in early learning before Children's Ground started – for most who had engaged, families reported that it was not regular engagement (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2017-20. Sample 370)<sup>6</sup>
- Children had variable access to Western early learning: Children living in:
  - Homeland outstations (1-1.5hrs north of Alice Springs) had no access
  - Two Town Camps had a playgroup visit in community once per week for two hours
  - Alice Springs - local childcare services, playgroups and preschools exist but were not being accessed by families within Children's Ground's population(Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016)
- Children had little to no access to culturally responsive learning environments in mainstream schools (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016)<sup>8</sup>
- On average 77% of Aboriginal children attended preschool (Geography: Alice Springs government schools. Year: 2015 full year. Sample: 2,207)<sup>9</sup>
- 41.9% of Aboriginal children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC developmental domains. 28.2% are vulnerable on two or more domains (Geography: Alice Springs excluding Town Camps. Year: 2015. Sample 117)<sup>10 11</sup>
- Percentage of Aboriginal children at or above national minimum NAPLAN standards (Geography: Alice Springs government schools. Year: 2015)<sup>12</sup>
  - YEAR 3: Reading = 38%. Writing = 60%. Numeracy = 50% (Sample: 104)
  - YEAR 5: Reading = 44%. Writing = 39%. Numeracy = 54% (Sample: 94)
- 12.5% of Aboriginal people (20 to 24 years) achieved Year 12 or equivalent (Geography: Alice Springs Town Camps. Year: 2016. Sample: 64)<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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

9 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2015 Attendance data by government school in Alice Springs

10 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

11 AEDC data for Alice Springs Town Camps was not publicly available. This suggests that children living in these areas, who are likely to be amongst the most vulnerable, are not represented in the data. Subsequently, the AEDC levels of vulnerability may not present an accurate picture of First Nations child development and wellbeing in Alice Springs

12 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2015 NAPLAN data by government school in Alice Springs

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



## Health & Wellbeing



- No children were regularly engaged in health promotion (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016)<sup>14</sup>
- Children and families living in Town Camps and Alice Springs had access to local Aboriginal health and hospital services, but those living on homeland outstations had no local access (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016)<sup>15</sup>
- 50% of community members reported<sup>16</sup> accessing clinical health services when needed (Combined responses: Not at all, A little bit of the time, Sometimes) (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020. Sample: 46)<sup>17</sup>
- 42.6% Aboriginal women smoking during pregnancy (Geography: Alice Springs Town Camps. Year: 2016-18. Sample: 80)<sup>18</sup>
- 14.1% of Aboriginal babies with low birthweight (defined as less than 2,500g) (Geography: Alice Springs Town Camps. Year: 2016-18. Sample: 88)<sup>19</sup>
- 22% of Aboriginal infants and children (aged 6 months to less than 5 years) reported as anaemic (Geography: Northern Territory. Year: 2014. No sample provided.)<sup>20</sup>
- 89% of children in out-of-home-care are Aboriginal (Geography: Northern Territory. Year: 2015-16. No sample provided = 1,020 children in care)<sup>21</sup>
- 67% of Aboriginal residents aged ≥15 years with type two diabetes (Geography: Alice Springs Health District. Year: 2014. No sample provided)<sup>22</sup>
- 40% of Aboriginal residents with a diagnosis of Rheumatic Heart Disease / Acute Rheumatic Fever (Geography: Northern Territory. Year: 2013-14. No sample provided)<sup>23</sup>
- In the Northern Territory, the Indigenous rate of end-stage renal disease is 2,180 per 1,000,000 compared with 111 non-Indigenous (Geography: Northern Territory. Year 2005. Sample not provided)<sup>24</sup>
- 45% of people reported a family member dying by suicide (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020. Sample: 47)<sup>25</sup>
- In the last 12 months, community members reported<sup>26</sup>:
  - 70% of people reported feeling low
  - 87% feeling worried
 (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020. Sample: 47)
- 30% of community members reported someone in their household lives with a disability (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020. Sample: 44)<sup>27</sup>

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

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

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

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

18 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

19 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

20 Northern Territory Aboriginal Health Key Performance Indicators (NT AHKPI) Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

21 Northern Territory Government Department of Territory Families 2015-16 Annual Report

22 NT AHKPI Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

23 NT AHKPI Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

24 Summary of Indigenous health: End-stage renal disease. Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, Edith Cowan University. Derived from The health and welfare of Australia's ATSI peoples 2005.

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

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

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

## Economic Wellbeing



- 34% of Children's Ground First Nations staff had never worked before starting with Children's Ground (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016-2019. Sample: 50)<sup>28</sup>
- 84% of Children's Ground First Nations staff were not employed when they started working at Children's Ground (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016-2019. Sample: 50)<sup>29</sup>
- 40% of First Nations staff were on unemployment benefits; 32% on other benefits (aged, family, disability); 71% of people who reported not receiving unemployment benefits had either never worked or had not worked for at least eight months (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2016-2019. Sample: 50)<sup>30</sup>
- 41.1% of Aboriginal people unemployed (Geography: Alice Springs Town Camps. Year: 2016. Sample: 90)<sup>31</sup>
- 66.5% of Aboriginal children (<15 years) in jobless families (Geography: Alice Springs Town Camps. Year: 2016. Sample: 251)<sup>32</sup>
- 46.7% Aboriginal 15-19 year-olds engaged in school, work or further ed/training (Geography: Alice Springs Town Camps. Year: 2016. Sample 128)<sup>33</sup>



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

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

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

31 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

32 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

33 PHIDU ATSI Supplementary indicator - learning or earning. Closing the Gap Time Series Atlas, data by Indigenous area: June 2019 Release And Social Atlas of Australia. Published 2016



## Cultural Wellbeing



- Community members reported (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020)<sup>34</sup>
  - 98% reported they would access a traditional healer if they were sick and in need of help (Sample: 46)
  - 73% reported Aboriginal language has gotten weaker in the last 10 years (Sample: 49)
  - 69% reported Aboriginal culture has gotten weaker in the last 10 years (Sample: 49)
  - 65% reported not at all or a little bit that they learned about their culture at school (Sample: 49)
  - 67% reported not at all or a little bit learning in their first language at school (Sample: 49)
  - 72% reported feeling pressure about their ability to fulfil cultural responsibilities (Sample: 47)



## Social Wellbeing



- 60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have experienced physical or sexual violence (Geography: Australia. Year: 2014-15. No sample provided)<sup>35</sup>
- Community members witnessed in the last 12 months<sup>36</sup>: (Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020)
  - 74% reported witnessing domestic violence and 38% experienced domestic violence (Sample: 47)
  - 58% reported lived in overcrowding (Sample: 48)
  - 96% experienced the death of a family member or close friend (Sample: 47)
- Community members reported<sup>37</sup>:
  - 80% reported being treated unfairly because they are Aboriginal in common places such as schools, work, shops, police, health centres, hospitals, government departments, transport, etc (Sample: 47)
  - 53% reported times when there was not enough food in the house. Of this 30% reported going without food (Sometimes or A little bit of the time) (Sample: 47)
  - 47% reported times when there was no power in their home. Of this 29% reported going without power (Sometimes or A little bit of the time) (Sample: 47)

(Geography: Children's Ground communities. Year: 2020)

- National Community survey<sup>38</sup> regarding awareness of neighbourhood/community problems<sup>39</sup>
  - 65.3% aware of problems involving alcohol
  - 57.4% aware of problems involving illegal drugs
  - 52.4% aware of problems involving theft
  - 51.4% aware of problems involving youths such as youth gangs/lack of youth activity
  - Other problems that were identified within their neighbourhood/community included family violence (46.2%), assault (45.6%), dangerous driving (46.2%) and gambling (34.8%)
  - 30.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over reported having used illicit substances in the last 12 months (34.0% of males compared with 27.1% of females)

(Geography: Australia. Year: 2014-15. Sample: 11,178)

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

35 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia 2018. Cat. no. FDV 2. Canberra: AIHW

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

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

38 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). 2014-15.

39 AIHW ATSI Health Performance Framework 2020 online data tables (National ATSI Health Survey, Social Survey and General Social Survey)



## Population reach

Children's Ground uses internal population data and mapping to understand the growth in reach year on year – building towards working with a critical mass of children and their families.

Building population data with communities defines a 'service population', which is an ongoing cohort analysis that factors in mobility and frequent family visitors. The service population is established with each community over the first years of implementation.

### Developing local population data

Over the first three years of operations, Children's Ground worked with each community to build a population list to measure key progress indicators over time. This process begins during the Walk, Talk & Act (WTA) Community Engagement and Planning phase and grows over the first years of implementation. The population mapping and data collected by each community is how Children's Ground understands the growth in reach year on year.

Population stability is impacted by a range of factors including:

- Mobility due to lack of access to services on homelands, poor housing, overcrowding and housing insecurity, community tensions and other reasons
- Removal of people from their traditional lands
- Lack of infrastructure and tenure
- Housing security, including overcrowding, homelessness, safety
- Income
- Grief/loss

People may live permanently on their homelands, between their homelands and Alice Springs or in Alice Springs with visits to their community and occasionally moving outside of the service area to other locations. This creates variations in both service and baseline population and requires sophisticated population mapping and monitoring.

Children's Ground experienced some challenges in undertaking population mapping to the extent needed – this was impacted by the limited resources of the growth model. It is estimated that there is an undercount in the number of young people and adults in each community, particularly those who are very mobile and do not engage with Children's Ground. It was noted that while families provided populations for their households, some were reluctant to share all information. This appeared to be related to concerns that they had too many people living in their house and that this may have repercussions in relation to housing authorities.

Work on refining population data through community mapping processes is ongoing. It is anticipated that this baseline population data will increase over time, particularly in relation to young people and adults<sup>40</sup>.

### Central Australian service population data

From 2017 to 2019, Children's Ground engaged with 81% of the population across all four Children's Ground communities<sup>41</sup>.

By the end of 2019, First Nations staff and community leaders had identified the following number of people by age:

**Table 1: CG Approach population reach<sup>42</sup>**

Children and families by age group	Number engaged in CG	Total CG population	% engaged in CG
<b>Children 0-8 years</b>	328	370	89%
<b>Young people 9-17 years (families)</b>	184	215	86%
<b>Adults 18+ years (families)</b>	432	577	75%

## Baseline community profiles - 2016 Walk, Talk & Act findings

This section includes a summary of findings from Ampekenhe Ahelhe's 2016 Walk, Talk & Act (WTA) Community Engagement and Planning phase. Full profiles for each community can be found in Appendix 5. These provide a baseline against which the evaluation is undertaken.

Profile information was reported by families and used internally by Children's Ground communities to develop their five-year strategic plans. It guides delivery and progress monitoring with each community against their aspirations and strategies for their children, families and communities.

Information gathered from leaders and families during WTA sessions were analysed. The primary concerns identified by communities included:

- Family arguments
- Young people not knowing their history and culture
- Children not attending school - worries about literacy and numeracy
- Children not learning and/or no longer speaking their own language
- Child nutrition
- Chronic hearing loss
- Early childhood hospitalisation
- Chronic health conditions in adults and children - in all families
- Disabilities
- Mental health concerns including suicidality, anxiety and depression
- Suicide
- Children in child protection and care
- Children and adults incarcerated
- Unemployment and financial dependence
- Alcohol and drugs
- Ongoing death, grief, loss and sorry business
- Not enough food at home
- Overcrowding in homes
- Unhappy parents
- Stress and pressure on grandparents caring for grandchildren
- Elders and cultural teachers getting older
- Concerns for young people's wellbeing (unemployment, substance use, education)

Each community commented that things were getting worse rather than improving. These concerns become integrated into progress and outcome indicators.

<sup>40</sup> See Appendix 3 for data notes, challenges and limitations around population mapping to date. In these early population mapping stages, total population data for young people and adults should be considered with caution

<sup>41</sup> Data includes visiting family members who engaged with Children's Ground

<sup>42</sup> Note: It is anticipated that the baseline population will increase as population data sets are refined. This could have implications for the percentage of engagement reported here.





# Growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe in Central Australia

The CG Approach is designed as a comprehensive, holistic and integrated approach that responds to key social and cultural determinants of health, wellbeing and life. The Approach requires all components to be operational for long term change to be achieved. Sustained investment and a focus on cultural safety, high-quality delivery, standards and integrity are not common for First Nations communities in mainstream systems.

In Central Australia, the decision to establish the Approach over time as a growth model presented a number of operational risks and evaluation challenges, including:

- Unknown time frame for growth – beginning with limited financial resources and growth needing to be managed and proportional to income
- The impact on operational integrity and quality due to the demands created by a lack of full operational resources
- The gaps in delivery critical to sustainability and ‘whole of systems’ reform which underpins whole of community long term change. The implementation of the full CG Approach over a 25-year period is expected to achieve long-term outcomes

Early implementation experience in Central Australia has shown it was the right decision to implement the growth model although stress across the organisation was apparent.

The following was put in place to manage expectations and mitigate the inherent risks:

## For operations and delivery

Expectations clearly considered Children’s Ground’s limited financial resources and plans to grow the CG Approach over time, meaning:

- Volunteer work from the community at some points in time
- Not all priorities could be actioned initially
- Progress and resources would be reviewed six-monthly

Setting these expectations was particularly important given the history of stop-start programs, resulting in a lack of consistency in First Nations communities.

## For monitoring and evaluation

- Daily data collection was flexible and responsive to how and when new delivery platforms became operational and grew



- Developments and increases in delivery largely occurred at key points in time to monitor impact on engagement and capacity, i.e. at the beginning of semesters or years
- Progress in short, medium and long-term indicators of change remained based on the full model, with clear recognition of limited resources and delivery of the growth model across each platform of the CG Approach

Over the course of the three years, community engagement and planning continued as service operations were established. Below is a process timeline of how the integrated service platform grew as resources increased from 2017 to 2019.

Figure 6 assesses the extent to which implementation grew towards the full CG Approach over the first three years. The per cent of delivery was assessed against the EFT and positions required for implementation of the full model CG Approach in each service platform area, as well as the delivery experiences, including recruitment and establishment challenges.

See Appendix 5 for a more extensive summary of the extent to which the CG Approach has grown towards the full model in Central Australia – by community and by each area of the integrated Learning, Wellbeing & Development platform.

Figure 7 provides a timeline of growth in Central Australia across each service area of the integrated service platform, as well as management, administration and evaluation.

**Figure 6: Operational growth by CG Approach platform area, by year**

Tracking against full CG Approach	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					



Figure 7: Operational growth in Central Australia from 2017 to 2019, compared to full CG Approach

Delivery in each community	Full CG Approach	2017	2018	2019
<b>Learning &amp; Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Four communities</li> <li>Learning five days a week (on-country and centre-based in communities)</li> <li>Extended hours learning (afterhours, weekends, school holidays)</li> <li>Literacy/learning resource production</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Three communities</li> <li>Early learning on country one day per week per community, increased to two days per week by mid-year</li> <li>No regular extended hours</li> <li>Small scale learning resource development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Three communities</li> <li>Early learning 2-3 days per week per community (On-country learning, centre-based and overnight extended on-country learning session)</li> <li>No regular extended hours</li> <li>Small scale learning resource development continued</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Three communities</li> <li>Early learning 3-4 days per week per community</li> <li>Fourth community began mid-2019 – 1-3 days per week by the end of 2019</li> <li>No regular extended hours</li> <li>Learning resource development continued with first published books as small local enterprise</li> </ul>
<b>Family Health &amp; Wellbeing</b>	Health and Wellbeing framework fully delivered <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health promotion</li> <li>Social/emotional wellbeing (SEWB)</li> <li>Nutrition</li> <li>Cultural health</li> <li>Environmental health</li> <li>Maternal and child health</li> <li>Place-based, in-community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There was no dedicated funding for family health and wellbeing promotion</li> <li>Local nutrition staff supported meals in all learning sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From late 2018, the Family Health and Wellbeing platform was partially funded</li> <li>Health promotion and SEWB commenced</li> <li>Delivery not yet fully place-based, in-community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All key areas of the Health and Wellbeing framework established with adequate resources for two communities stretched over four</li> <li>Increased in-community delivery, but not yet fully place-based</li> </ul>
<b>Community Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local First Nations governance for the region and each community</li> <li>Intergenerational hub of learning, wellbeing and safety in each community</li> <li>Community development</li> <li>Community celebrations of family, culture and safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Governance) in place</li> <li>No funding for community development resources – work undertaken by other staff</li> <li>Places of safety created for learning and delivery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme</li> <li>Family nights and community celebration (average one per term)</li> <li>Intergenerational place-based hubs not resourced</li> <li>Places of safety for learning and delivery</li> <li>Ongoing work to secure tenure, water and power for Irrkerlantye</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme</li> <li>Family nights and community celebration (average one per term)</li> <li>Intergenerational place-based hubs not resourced</li> <li>Places of safety for learning and delivery</li> <li>WTA community engagement and planning in fourth community in mid-2019</li> <li>Ongoing work to secure tenure, water and power for Irrkerlantye</li> </ul>
<b>Economic Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Widespread local First Nations employment</li> <li>Enterprise opportunities and support</li> <li>Financial and consumer literacy</li> <li>Training and mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited local community employment</li> <li>No funding for financial and consumer literacy</li> <li>No enterprise work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start of learning resource enterprise</li> <li>Increased local employment</li> <li>Limited resources for adequate training and mentoring</li> <li>No funding for financial and consumer literacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maturing social enterprise</li> <li>Increased local employment</li> <li>Limited resources for adequate training and mentoring</li> <li>No funding for financial and consumer literacy</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural &amp; Creative Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elders' leadership</li> <li>First Nations Governance</li> <li>Culture, law, language and practice is promoted and privileged in all Children's Ground activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culture, law, language and practice is prioritised through all areas of delivery</li> <li>Limited by organisational resources and staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culture, law, language and practice is prioritised through all areas of delivery</li> <li>Limited by organisational resources and staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culture, law, language and practice is prioritised through all areas of delivery</li> <li>Increased resources for language revitalisation</li> </ul>
<b>Service collaboration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Planning and delivery partnerships with key services across internal integrated service platform and local service systems</li> <li>Service partnerships that enable seamless access for children and families to culturally safe services and environments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some local service collaboration and partnerships</li> <li>Member of local interagency committees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local service collaborations increased to include joint delivery partnerships with some services</li> <li>Ongoing membership of local interagency committees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased staffing enabled increased capacity for coordination of services internally and externally</li> <li>Beginnings of seamless access to some local services through delivery partnerships</li> </ul>
<b>Organisational quality and standards (for Central Australian operations)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adequately resourced, management, finance, administration, HR, infrastructure, resources and systems for quality, efficiency and effectiveness</li> <li>Adequately resourced monitoring and evaluation for data-informed planning and practice, with First Nations leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited resources</li> <li>No local administration, inadequate office space, no dedicated HR and emerging systems</li> <li>Inadequate evaluation staff and resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited resources</li> <li>Local finance function</li> <li>No local HR, administration, inadequate office space</li> <li>Emerging systems and standards</li> <li>Inadequate evaluation staff and resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Small increase in senior staff</li> <li>Small scale local administration</li> <li>Inadequate office space, no dedicated HR</li> <li>Maturing of some systems</li> <li>Ongoing constrained resources across management and administration</li> <li>Increased resources for evaluation</li> </ul>





## Section Three: Evaluation findings and analysis



# Evaluation Findings and Analysis

Children’s Ground works with communities that experience intergenerational and extreme entrenched injustice and disadvantage. As a 25-year strategy, Children’s Ground has key building blocks to achieve long term sustainable change. This strategy includes not only *what* is delivered but *how*.

This evaluation assesses the multiple drivers for change, including empowerment and access, along with the types and quality of integrated services required to achieve long term opportunity. This is considered through both a Western lens and a First Nations lens where First Nations systems have always been integrated across generations and are based within a strong system of law and governance.

## What Children’s Ground intended to do: Years 1-3 of the CG Approach

The focus of the first years of implementation is to set the foundation for 25-years of delivery and to establish the processes and governance to sustain this within the integrity of the Approach. This includes both delivery of services as well as comprehensive community engagement, empowerment and processes to privilege First Nations voice, systems, knowledge and practice. As shown in Figure 8, achieving access and equity in services is a key progress measure for early stage delivery of the CG Approach. It is the foundation from which opportunity and change become possible, and long-term sustained change can be achieved. Figure 8 presents growth and development phased across years associated with the full CG Approach. With the limited resources of the growth model, at the end of 2019, Central Australia remained in the ‘Access & Engagement’ phase.

Figure 8: CG Approach 25-year delivery and progress phases



<sup>43</sup> Growth assessment is based on year-on-year growth for each area of the CG Approach against the full CG model



As previously discussed (see Figure 7), there was a gradual increase in the extent to which the full CG Approach was implemented in Central Australia from 2017 to 2019.

The phased implementation plan focused on:

- Establishing strong local governance
- Continuing community engagement and planning
- Establishing operations in four communities identified by Elders, beginning with the three that resources would allow
- Prioritising early learning and wellbeing (cultural and Western), nutrition, community governance and some local First Nations employment
- Building resources to develop and grow the other areas of the integrated service platform as well as embedding cultural practices and knowledge through operations
- Building towards engaging with a critical mass of children and their families – measured against family and community population mapping undertaken with community leaders

This evaluation of early-stage development and impact has three areas of analysis, each with key evaluation questions:

- 1. Process analysis:** Has the CG Approach implemented as intended? In this case, in the context of a 'growth model', compared to the full CG Approach. What was the impact of implementing a growth model, rather than the full CG Approach?
- 2. Impact analysis:** What progress occurred towards longer term impact against the evaluation outcomes?
- 3. Systems change analysis:** What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and any early progress towards impact (Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, Evaluation)? What contribution has been made towards broader Systems reform?

Children's Ground's evaluations look to document and assess processes to understand the core elements that can enable empowerment and change and can be scalable.

While the development of the CG Approach followed the same implementation plan for each community - each community is unique. Operationally, development of the CG Approach is assessed and monitored by community and together they form the Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe region. Through this report, the majority of data is presented for the Central Australian region, with some process and development analysis by community to reflect the unique progress in each.





# 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."*

**Family/Staff member**

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

<p><i>Child, family &amp; community led</i></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><i>In-community (place-based)</i></p>	<p>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. Building social, cultural and economic capital and governance is enabled by intergenerational community centres which are central to delivery of the full model. No access to existing centres in communities limited the implementation of full place-based delivery. Achieving standards of in-community delivery requires dedicated resources for each community.</p>
<p><i>Start early</i></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><i>Expect and deliver the best</i></p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><i>A critical mass (work with everyone)</i></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><i>Assume and celebrate ability</i></p>	<p>Effectively mobilised community and individual strengths, while embedding first language and culture across the CG Approach. Limited by capacity.</p>
<p><i>Deliver the whole, not the bits</i></p>	<p>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.</p>	<p><i>Stay for the long-term</i></p>	<p>This principle can only be assessed over time. Key early foundations of First Nations governance, employment and long term strategic plans are in place.</p>
<p><i>Innovation – combining the old and new ways</i></p>	<p>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.</p>		

The process evaluation demonstrated that ‘how’ services are delivered is as important as ‘what’ is delivered. The time taken to empower people in all processes and systems was central to local governance and engagement of children and families. Applying a strengths-based and culturally privileged approach provided an affirming environment for First Nations talent and leadership. This was evidenced by the engagement of First Nations people in systems and service design, delivery and evaluation. This in turn created the cultural safety and positive experiences and environments for children from their earliest years – led by their families and communities.

Evaluation data has evidenced that taking the time to establish and grow bottom-up community decision-making has seen increased empowerment experienced and reported by First Nations people and communities.

Local First Nations employment has been evidenced as an important enabler for ensuring cultural safety, encouraging child/family engagement and embedding cultural teaching, learning and other knowledge systems and practices. The soft entry flexible employment model has been enabled by organisational systems and policies and dedicated positions for First Nations expertise across operations. The evaluation evidence shows that local First Nations employment and the visibility and privileging of First Nations culture enabled and strengthened local governance.

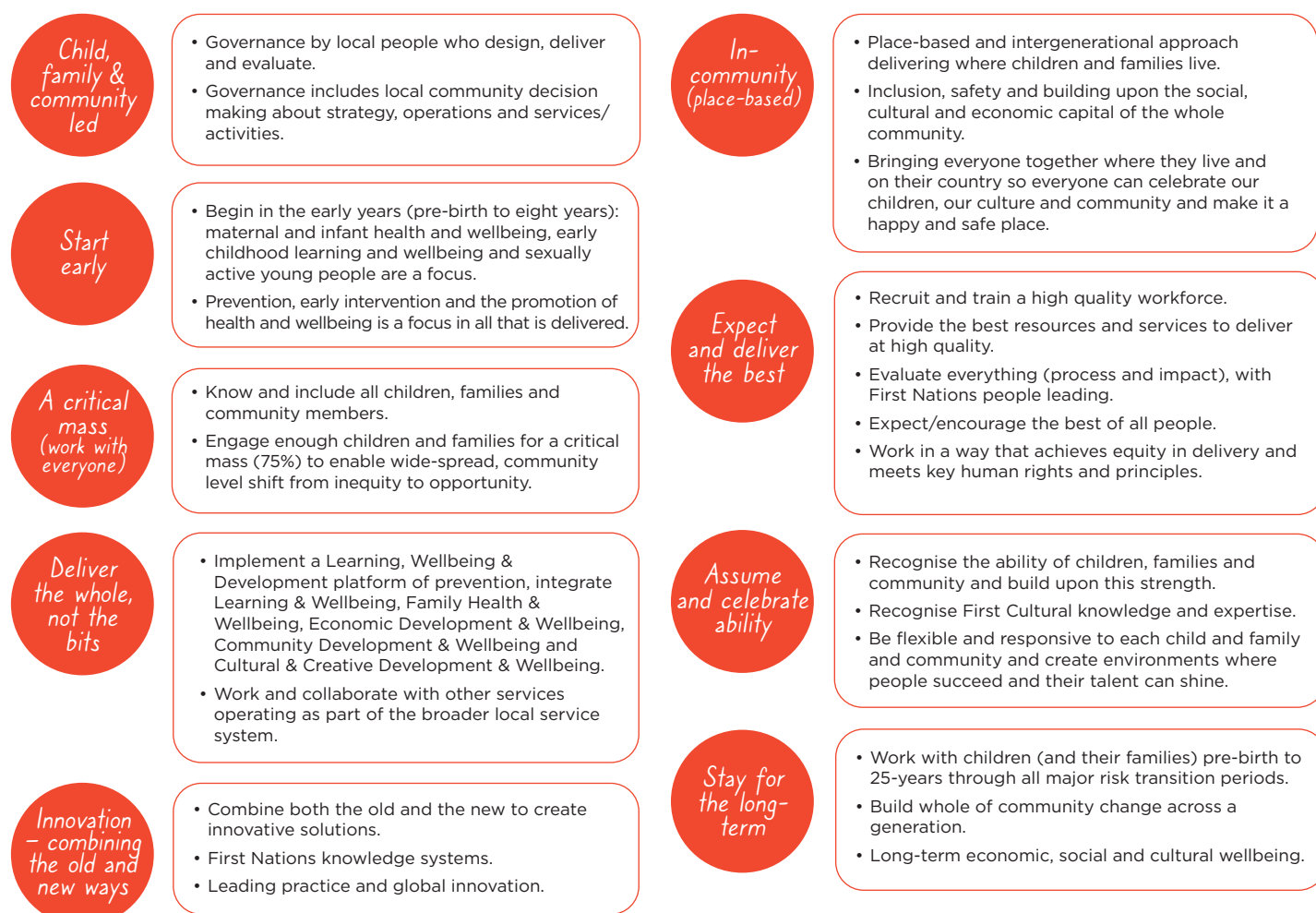
The evidence in this second process evaluation of the CG Approach demonstrates that the Approach can be scaled to diverse contexts. When the key principles underpinning the Approach are implemented with integrity, either at full scale as in Kakadu or through a growth model as in Central Australia, they enable empowerment, access and equity in services.

Children’s Ground’s evaluation framework (see Appendix 2) outlines the long-term outcomes sought from the CG Approach for children, families and communities, including impact progress indicators across each phase of delivery. It is important to also undertake process evaluations to understand ‘what’ and ‘how’ the CG Approach is delivered, because this is what will lead to change and impact. How the CG Approach is delivered is set out across the nine practice principles of the Approach.

This section summarises the practice principles through which process and implementation effectiveness have been evaluated – noting that all elements of the CG Approach are interconnected and necessary to build towards achieving sustained change over a generation. Also recognising that the CG Approach growth model has impacted the delivery of all elements of the CG Approach.

Figure 9 articulates the practice principles and how they relate to service delivery (e.g. integrated service platform) and system enablers (e.g. reform in governance, services, etc).

**Figure 9: CG Approach practice principles**







## Anwerne Ampe-kenhe Ahelhele iwerre arratye alhetyeke akwete community-ele arlike apentetyeke (Community to lead the way)

This principle recognises that Children's Ground belongs to the families (including children) and communities. They are integrally involved in the governance, design and delivery of their programs and services and lead the day to day operations. This includes recognition of First Nations governance and leadership structures.

Under each principle, a summary of evaluation data and findings are included, with further detail included in Appendix 6.

*"The Land, the people, the story – that's our Governance."*

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

Of the Children's Ground principles, community leadership is first and foremost because it underpins and enables implementation of the whole CG Approach. Robust local governance that recognises traditional First Nations decision making structures is key to implementation effectiveness. The process of establishing and growing First Nations child, family and community leadership and governance is embedded from the outset and begins during community engagement and planning.

Governance structures for Children's Ground's Central Australian region were established, adhering to cultural governance based on land, Elders, family and cultural relationships.

Each community governs its own area and comes together regularly for governance meetings for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe more broadly. The structure also includes 'daily governance' with children and families ('service users'). This occurred by engaging families in each community in decision-making through the delivery of early learning and employment and ongoing Walk, Talk & Act with families.

*"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."*

Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme

Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme met for whole of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe planning, review and decisions. In these first years of implementation, meetings included a focus on the development of quality and standards in learning with a key outcome being the articulation of the Arrernte early childhood learning and wellbeing curriculum framework.

See Appendix 6 for further detail about governance practices and systems.

From 2017 to 2019, a total 106 First Nations staff, family and community members engaged in governance of Children's Ground. Table 2 shows the number of meetings and number of people involved in governance and decision-making.

**Table 2: Number of governance meetings and people engaged, by year**

	2017	2018	2019
<b>Number of people</b>	21	58	82
<b>Number of meetings</b>	16*	41	38

\*Note: In 2017 governance data collection was not routinely collected in the early days of operations. Therefore, the number of meetings should be considered conservative.

In evaluation interviews, when asked 'Does Children's Ground listen to First Nations people?' and 'Are First Nations people making the important decisions?', 85% (n=27) of First Nations families, leaders and staff responded, 'yes' to both questions and 11% responded 'sometimes'. The quotes below are a representative sample of the strongest evaluation themes.

*"Yes, definitely. Yes. Yes. Yes. A lot of people's listening to us, what we are saying, what we want for our children and for ourselves. Nobody is saying you can't go out today or you can't do that."*

*"When we have our voice heard, when we have our conferences, or where we go and share our stories about Children's Ground. I feel really proud because there wasn't a place like Children's Ground before, because Children's Ground is when we get everybody together and we run it our way. Nobody is telling us what to do."*

*"We are the leaders and families and staff follow. I'm really happy for that. No one has ever done that with us before – no one has let us lead."*

*"Children's Ground has listened to us from the start. Nobody else listens to us – others went half way to listening and stopped and we were back to same spot and had to start again, try again."*

*"Children's Ground is easy to talk to if we want things to be stronger and things to be done."*

*"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."*

Family/Staff members, 2019





When asked 'How have you been involved in governance?', 85% (n=27) people reported involvement in planning as key to this. Of this, 26% of people reported it can be challenging to stick to delivery plans at times.

*"Sometimes we plan for learning but learning doesn't go according to plan – there are lots of things that change that mean our plan doesn't work."*

Family/Staff member, 2019

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."*

*"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."*

*"We have the voice, we can talk. We can tell them what we need, what we want."*

*"It feels really good to be a leader."*

Family/Staff members, 2019



Twenty-one First Nations family members and staff stated that Elders are critical to Children's Ground, particularly in relation to governance, developing young people as the next generation leaders, for cultural teaching and transmission and as the cultural authority for all to learn from.

*"Very important to have the Elders here working because they can teach us as well as the kids. Then we teach the kids where we are and why."*

*"We've got Elders that come in, like them old ladies when they come in. They come in and they make people feel like there's all these bosses coming in – and they just come in and they just want to be at Children's Ground... If it wasn't for our Elders, we wouldn't be here. We've only got a few of our Elders left."*

*"To make people think – you got to think like your old people and make decisions. Like talk about it the right way. Because she [an Elder] always tell us you got to be the right person to talk with this country. The right person to go and talk to that person. So she gives us a lot of advice. Because sometimes I get a lot of people asking me questions, so I come back and I ask her. That cultural way, you know."*

*"It makes me feel proud because all of my Elders are here – some are passing away and they will never see a change in the system, and it's sad."*

*"They're planning with us – role model and teaching us a lot of things too about how we live and Aboriginal cultural way."*

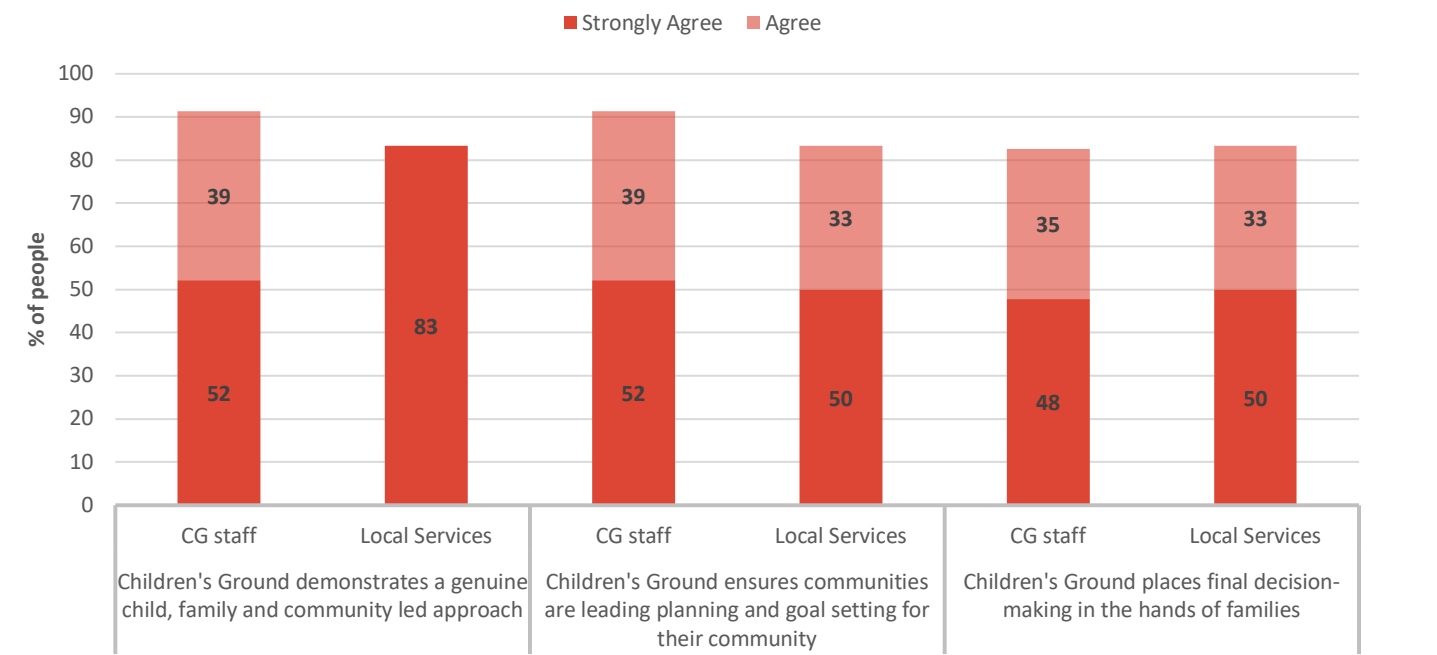
*"We just have to talk to the Elders and ask them what they really want."*

Family/Staff members, 2019



Children’s Ground staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) and local services were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about the way in which Children’s Ground works in a community-led manner. Graph 1 presents the findings – for Children’s Ground staff (n=23) and local services (n=6).

**Graph 1: The extent to which Children’s Ground works in a community-led manner**



The process of building local leadership was not simply achieved through structures and systems that promote people’s voice and decision making. It also included a deliberate focus on understanding the history of oppression, attempted genocide and imposed structures that have deliberately denied the right of First Nations people to exercise control over their lives.

The history of forced control over First Nations people included both restrictive policies and traumatic punitive measures - sometimes sanctioned by the state and at other times enforced by individuals with power. First Nations people endured massacres, slavery, physical and sexual abuse, the removal of children, financial abuse, exclusion, incarceration and racism. This history also includes the denial of First Nations governance systems that existed prior to colonisation, and that continue to be denied in any structural level in Australia.

Families who lead Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe continue to be impacted by this history. Many families today continue to negotiate threats in relation to child removal, economic controls and engagement with the criminal justice system. Further, the impact of colonisation and ongoing economic poverty creates social and family stress that requires a

focus on day-to-day survival as a priority. While leadership occurs within cultural and family responsibilities, leadership in a public context is often out of reach for people due to complex barriers and historical trauma.

Children’s Ground has a deliberate focus on leadership development that includes empowerment and decolonisation. It is about understanding the impact of colonisation on power, leadership, control and agency.

Children’s Ground seeks to achieve this through both formal and informal processes. First Nations led strategic and operational planning and decision making seek to deconstruct the status-quo of top-down power and control. Part of this process includes understanding how top-down systems have been formed and the impact of this on people’s agency and voice. This process aims to create space to imagine a new, post-colonial context that re-privileges people’s first culture and leadership without retribution and with support. This is contributing to a process of cultural revitalisation and empowerment.

Over the past three years, this process has become a formally embedded part of the implementation of the CG Approach and enacted through the systems and principles of the Approach.

### Summary

The processes and data presented in this section demonstrate that Children's Ground is implementing the principle of being community led extensively and as intended. Empowerment and local governance were a key focus for the period as foundational to the Approach. This was challenging due to the impact of colonisation and the limited resources of the growth model. The data also shows that more work is required to increase the regularity and engagement in community-by-community and daily governance.



Start  
early

**Akweke anthurre mapenge urrke arne mpwaremele urrakapetyeke**  
(Start early with the little ones)

This principle emphasises the importance of children having the best start in life and opportunities through childhood. This means reaching children from pre and post birth and their parents (including sexually active adolescents) in relation to learning, wellbeing and child development. This principle is also about focusing on prevention and early intervention in all that we do.

Children's Ground focused on early childhood learning and wellbeing as the core service delivery from the outset. Over the first three years of establishment and growth, delivery increased as resources became available. Children's Ground seeks to increase early learning and extended hours delivery to at least 5-6 days per week to provide equitable access to formal and extra-curricular learning opportunities for children and families. This includes growing delivery to achieve Universal Access<sup>44</sup> to preschool education (at least 15 hours per week or 600 hours per year) for children in the two years before they start primary school.

As described in the growth timeline in section 'Growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe in Central Australia', learning started with one day a week delivery in 2017 in three communities and by the end of 2019 grew to 3-4 sessions a week in four communities. This saw early learning sessions increase from 156 in 2017 to 320 sessions in 2019. During this period, 290 children aged 0-8 years engaged in Learning & Wellbeing with Children's Ground.



**Figure 10: Occasions of Learning & Wellbeing delivery, by semester from 2017-19**



In the anonymous survey of Children's Ground staff, 82% (n=17) reported that, through their work with Children's Ground, they engage with children aged 0-5 years at least weekly (Daily=18%; Twice weekly= 35%; Weekly=29%).

The principle of 'Start Early' is also about health promotion and prevention from pre-birth. Nutrition was integrated into early years learning as part of education and wellbeing from the beginning.

In October 2018, Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing platform was funded by the Commonwealth Government Department of Health. This saw the beginning of full integration of Western and cultural health promotion into all early learning sessions, delivered by family health practitioners alongside early childhood educators. From this point onwards, health promotion integrated in early learning grew in diversity and intensity.

<sup>44</sup> Universal Access: A national policy partnership for children participating in a high-quality early childhood education program for 15 hours per week or 600 hours per year in the year before full-time school.



By January 2019, following recruitment of the Family Health team, 100% of children aged 0-8 years attending early learning engaged in health promotion focused on both Western and First Nations knowledge and activities, including:

- Nutrition (nutritious meals and snacks and conversations/education about nutrition)
- Healthy routines (teeth cleaning, face and hand washing, nose blowing)
- Western and cultural health learning content
- Health and wellbeing check-ins (checking ears, teeth, skin, cleaning sores and talking with families about the impact on children's learning if they are tired or hungry)
- Cultural health promotion (collecting, preparing and eating/applying bush foods and medicines, traditional health practices and safety on country, spending time on country)
- Social/emotional wellbeing (mindfulness activities, conversations and learning environments that are set up to provide spaces for children to express their feelings, i.e. quiet hideaway spaces and physical activity)
- Physical health promotion and activity (climbing, running, swimming, physical games, etc)
- Health promotion activities and conversations were not necessarily undertaken in all learning sessions. However, through regular early learning, children and families engage in health promotion that seeks to build their awareness of the importance of all aspects of their health and to increase agency over health and wellbeing from children's earliest years.

In evaluation interviews, when asked 'Have you seen Children's Ground work in this way [Starting Early principle]?', all (100%. n=27) First Nations family/staff members responded 'yes'. The quotes below represent the strongest themes from their collective responses, when asked 'How?'.

*"We always put our little ones first. This is always about our little ones and how we are going to work with them. All staff are working for the little ones – we work together."*

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

*"Seen a lot of little ones here. They were about probably one or two when they started, so yeah, really little. They're like four, five and six now."*

*"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."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

## Summary

The findings demonstrate that Children's Ground has focused on 'starting early' in respect to engaging with young children and their families in early learning and early childhood focused health promotion. Data demonstrates that this principle has been implemented as intended with the resources available. However, Children's Ground is yet to achieve the national benchmark of delivering Universal Access to early childhood education across all locations for children in the year before they start primary school.



*A critical mass  
(work with  
everyone)*

### Tyerrtye ingkerrenyekenge urrkapytyeke (Work with everyone)

This principle moves away from the traditional approach of case managing targeted families and engages children and families across the entire community to lead whole of community change, from disadvantage to opportunity. This principle is based on the assumption that when a critical mass (75%) of people within the community experience opportunity, safety and wellbeing, the broader community is also likely to experience wellbeing (culturally, economically and socially) over the long-term.

A key progress indicator towards long-term, whole of community change across a generation is engaging with the majority of children aged 0-8 years in each community. The hypothesis is that, if most children in a community experience high quality opportunity from birth through to adulthood, this will create generational change. Children's Ground refers to this as engaging a 'critical mass'.

Engaging a critical mass of children and families is facilitated through a focus on culturally and socially safe environments, inclusiveness and local governance and employment.

Over time, engagement is analysed at a community level and at the level of child engagement in learning and wellbeing. In the first 1-3 years of full delivery, the focus is on engaging a critical mass of children and their families in any Children's Ground platform area (learning, family health, economic development, governance). In the subsequent implementation years, the focus is on engaging a critical mass of children and their families in learning and health promotion.

Beginning as a growth model, the expectation of reaching a critical mass was assessed against capacity. It was expected that critical mass would be achieved once the full operational model is in place. Over the period from 2017-2019, CG Approach operations grew to approximately 60% of the full model, so engagement of a critical mass of children and adults across the whole population within each community was not expected.

However, from 2017 to 2019, Children's Ground engaged with 89% of children 0-8 years across the service population. Within each community, the reach of children 0-8 years was as follows:

- Community 1: engaged with 84%
- Community 2: engaged with 89%
- Community 3 & 4: engaged with 90%<sup>45</sup>

The percentages indicate that Children's Ground reached a critical mass of children aged 0-8 years in each community and across the region. This is the foundation from which regular and consistent attendance is built.

It should also be noted that assessing a critical mass is based on population data that continues to be collected with each community. This figure will vary as population data becomes more comprehensive and engagement increases.

Data throughout this report shows a steady increase of engagement over time from 2017 to 2019. However, a resource analysis demonstrated clear barriers to engagement. Funding constraints meant that delivery was reduced to only parts of the approach, limiting access to

and engagement of children and families. Examples of early resource constraints included only being able to deliver learning one day a week for each community, limited vehicles (and seats) to transport all those who wanted to engage in learning, the absence of accessible intergenerational centres in each community and no dedicated funding for Community Development which impacts whole of community engagement.

The principle of working with a critical mass within each community also focuses on inclusiveness – engaging with all First Nations people in each community so that children and families do not fall through the gap. Having a deliberate focus on reach requires service standards that push staff to reach everyone, where possible, in the community.

In evaluation interviews, when asked 'Have you seen Children's Ground work in this way [Critical Mass principle]?', responses were varied and related to both engagement and challenges within this principle. Responses related to the following themes (n=27):

- 70% reported that intergenerational engagement is occurring and bringing in more families
- 63% reported that all families are engaging together
- 63% noted that some families don't or only sometimes engage due to experiencing life stressors, cultural obligations and other factors
- 52% reported that increased family and community engagement is needed (with 30% specifically noting the need for greater engagement of men and young people)
- 44% reported that undertaking extensive Walk, Talk & Act was important but challenging due to staff and vehicle resource limitations to deliver Children's Ground and undertake community engagement simultaneously



<sup>45</sup> Community 3 & 4 have been combined for this analysis due to the strong family and cultural connections and their shared traditional lands. Children and families engage in activities in both communities, meaning at this time data for the two communities were inseparable.

The quotes below represent the strongest themes from their collective responses.

*"Lots of families coming but lots still aren't."*

*"There's not always enough time and staff for our Walk & Talk. We try but want to keep doing early years too... and we don't have enough cars."*

*"Sometimes it's really hard for us, when we have our sorry business, or when there's not enough staff. When the [First Nations] staff are not coming, they have some reasons."*

*"It's family things - it could be medical related or family sorry business, or they're away living on their own country and can't make it back into town for at least a month or so. Those are the things that stop our little ones from coming."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

When asked 'Is there anything Children's Ground can do better or differently' to achieve this practice principle, responses were primarily focused on the need for additional resources to undertake Walk, Talk & Act community engagement. Other prevalent themes included:

- More engagement and activity with young people
- Increased staff and financial resources
- Stability in Western-trained staff - limited staff due to resources being shared across sites and recruitment/retention of staff
- Continuing to increase family engagement

Of these, the strongest theme that emerged from every evaluation interview was the need to increase engagement with young people. Children's Ground's original focus on the principle of 'Starting Early' was working towards ensuring that the current generation of young children grow up to live a different life to the current generation of young people and adults. It also referred to early intervention.

Operations in both Kakadu and in Central Australia have identified that actively engaging with young people is a priority of the community. Furthermore, engagement of young people has proven to impact their wellbeing and positively influence children's learning and wellbeing as young people provide powerful role modelling.

*"We need to do more with the older kids- the youth, they need support too. They are bored and nothing to do - need more support for them to be involved in the same stuff - like the bush trips."*

*"A lot of young people who want to work - we need to do better at engaging them."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

While there were not dedicated resources within the CG Approach for widespread engagement with young people in the first few years of delivery, Children's Ground did allocate some resources to running one-off school holiday programs and contributed to planning, transport and support of local interagency school holiday programs. Some resources enabled a small Men's & Youth team to be established. This team works with the Learning and Health teams in cultural learning, community development and environmental health.

The importance of First Nations intergenerational approaches and of engaging a critical mass of children and their families in building towards the full CG Approach means securing dedicated resources to provide engagement, employment and leadership opportunities for young people is a high priority. In the meantime, Children's Ground works with the small number of young people currently engaged through employment and youth leadership and one-off family events and local youth programs.

In evaluation focus groups, Western-trained staff supported the view of First Nations participants that engaging a critical mass has been significantly affected by the lack of resources impacting ongoing Walk, Talk & Act (community engagement) with families not yet actively engaged. The full CG Approach includes Community Development positions for each community which were not in place during the period of evaluation. These positions are instrumental in community engagement.



## Summary

The data presented in this section demonstrates that Children's Ground has made strong progress towards engaging a critical mass of children and their families in early years learning and whole of community change. However, the critical mass is based on the service population and further population mapping is still required. Evidence shows that reach and engagement across families and age groups such as young people require further improvements, which requires consistent community engagement. While on track, this has not yet been achieved to the extent intended as per the full CG Approach.



*Deliver the whole, not the bits*

**Arne ingkerrenyeke anyentelhe iletyeke: tyerretye ngwenhe mwerre anetyeke, akaltye irremele, tyerrtye ngwenge artweye mapenge**  
(Connect everything: learning, health, culture, work)







This principle upholds that addressing the social, structural and economic factors that contribute to extreme economic poverty, inequity and intergenerational disadvantage in the communities in which Children's Ground works is critical to lasting positive outcomes. It supports a shift from single issue responses to a comprehensive, integrated response by addressing all issues that impact a child's life - education, health, wellbeing, economy, society, law, environment and culture.

First Nations systems and practice integrate all elements of a person's life from birth into old age – this is referred to as 'Altyerre' by Arrernte people in Central Australia. Western systems separate and silo the funding and delivery of services and supports. This creates challenges and barriers to access that result in inequitable access and engagement.

The principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' refers to Children's Ground's Learning, Wellbeing and Development (LWD) integrated services platform. It is the most visible

part of the CG Approach (i.e. daily services and activities). The standard of this principle is to deliver the key social, cultural and economic determinants for each child and their family to achieve lifelong wellbeing. This principle places the person/family/community in the centre of delivery to ensure their needs are fulfilled. This reverses the focus from organisational and government program priorities to the user and their experience in an integrated responsive service environment. Figure 11 depicts the integrated service platform outlining 'what' services are delivered.

**Figure 11: CG Approach 'Learning, Wellbeing and Development' integrated service platform**

25 year Learning, Wellbeing and Development					Integration and Delivery
<b>Learning &amp; Wellbeing</b> 	<b>Stage 1</b> Early childhood 0-8 year olds	<b>Stage 2</b> Childhood 6-11 year olds	<b>Stage 3</b> Young people 12-16 year olds	<b>Stage 4</b> Emerging adults 17-24 year olds	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• First Nations &amp; Western curriculum and pedagogy</li><li>• Early childhood education and development</li><li>• Integrating health and emotional literacy</li><li>• Family engagement</li><li>• On country and in centre</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• First Nations &amp; Western curriculum and pedagogy with global skills and knowledge, creating engaged and successful learners</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• First Nations, Western &amp; global skills and knowledge cont.</li><li>• Transition to adulthood</li><li>• Enterprise skills</li><li>• Workforce ready</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide individual support and mentoring plans to assist transitions to work and further education</li></ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Physical, emotional, social, cognitive, creative, academic, cultural, financial knowledge and skills</b></li><li>• <b>Individual learning and wellbeing plans</b></li><li>• <b>Out of hours education and extracurricular programs</b></li></ul>				
<b>Family Health &amp; Wellbeing</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Health promotion</b> – Promotion outreach and social determinants focus (integrated into programs as well as outreach)</li><li>• <b>Social and emotional wellbeing</b> – Counselling, learning integration (addressing trauma and stress)</li><li>• <b>Child and maternal health</b> – Support and education focused on maternal and child health, sexual health, nutrition, childhood emotional and cognitive development, parenting</li><li>• <b>Nutrition</b> – Preparing and cooking breakfast, lunch and morning/afternoon tea for children</li><li>• <b>Environmental health</b> – Supporting healthier and safer environments in which children live</li></ul>				
<b>Community</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Local Governance</b></li><li>• <b>Intergenerational Community Centre</b></li><li>• <b>Community Development</b> - Community led design of activities strengthens and celebrates safety, family, culture and daily life and responds to community priorities/needs.</li></ul>				
<b>Culture</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Culture, law, language and practice</b> is promoted and revitalised in all CG activities with resources to strengthen and access cultural life</li></ul>				
<b>Economy</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Employment and training</b></li><li>• <b>Enterprise</b></li><li>• <b>Financial and consumer literacy</b></li></ul>				
<b>Coordination</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Internal and external service coordination</b> – formal agreements, partner delivery, collective impact, facilitation of access to other services</li></ul>				

This section of the report evaluates the extent to which:

- The LWD platform was implemented as intended – as a holistic, integrated and effective suite of services, supports and opportunities.
- Effective collaboration occurred between Children's Ground and other local services.

Appendix 6 provides a detailed assessment of the extent to which Children's Ground's Learning, Wellbeing and Development integrated services platform increased in delivery from 2017 to 2019.

## Integration across Children's Ground's LWD platform

Integrated service delivery is about establishing an approach that is child centric – focusing on how services work together to meet the holistic needs of a child, family or community. The aim is to reduce systems barriers created by siloed service delivery and improve access to meaningful and responsive service system. This section demonstrates how the five Children's Ground service areas integrate to deliver and respond to the holistic needs of children and families.

The extent of the integration grew as resources grew from 2017 to 2019.

As at the end of 2019, integrated practice across Children's Ground's LWD platform included:

- Early learning sessions are a 'soft-entry' point to accessing and engaging in health, employment, governance and growing social and cultural capital.
- Cultural knowledge standards and practices integrated into early learning, family health, community governance and employment support.
- Regular coordination of services internally and externally.
- Formalised integrated planning between Learning and Family Health teams.

- Health promotion and social and emotional wellbeing embedded across all operational areas including learning, governance, community development and supported by all staff and as part of the organisation's People and Culture (Human Resources) team for First Nations staff - employment and wellbeing support to reduce engagement barriers.

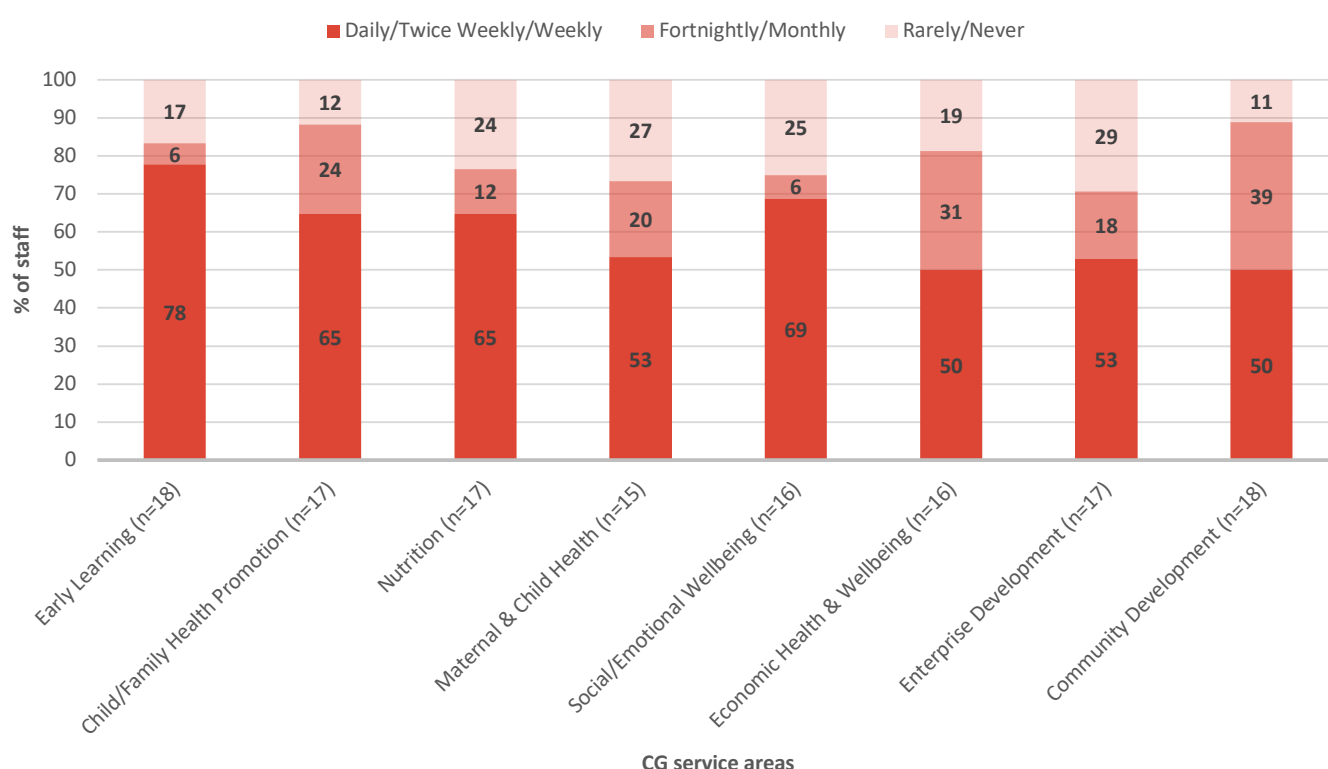
See Appendix 6 for further detail about integrated practice.

Integration is enabled by First Nations employment across all areas of the service platform. Over the period of the evaluation, increased delivery of early learning, family health and First Nations employment all contributed to growth in child and family engagement. This also increased engagement in community governance for the Central Australian region and opportunities for leadership and decision making with families ('users').

To evaluate the extent and processes of integration, Children's Ground First Nations (n=14) and non-First Nations (n=9) staff (via an anonymous online survey) were asked a series of questions to capture the ways and frequency with which they worked and connected with other service areas across the LWD platform.

Staff were asked 'How often they connect with staff in each service area about a child or family'. Graph 2 shows the reported frequency with which they connect with key service areas of Children's Ground. The number of staff who completed these questions varies so the total number (n=) is included for each within the graph.

**Graph 2: Frequency of connections between CG Approach service areas about children/families**







See Appendix 6 for further data about the extent to which internal integration was achieved.

Children's Ground's internal integration doesn't use the standard sector language of 'referrals'. Teams are designed to facilitate integration through regular multidisciplinary team meetings (i.e. learning, health, etc), planning, integrated delivery and 'informal referrals' where staff are regularly talking with each other and families to respond to needs. Staff reported undertaking the following integrated practice at least weekly (daily, twice weekly or weekly):

- 86% of staff (n=14) reported 'other' Children's Ground staff (health promotion, nutrition, maternal/child health, social/emotional wellbeing, creative arts, etc) attended and/or delivered a session within early learning
- 73% of staff (n=15) reported coordinating support for children, young people and families
- 80% of staff (n=15) reported talking with other Children's Ground staff about a child/family (informal internal referral)

In evaluation focus groups, all Western-trained staff referred to examples of effective internal integration with the child and family at the centre of the service response. However, all also referred to a lack of time and resources for embedding internal integration more systematically.

Not delivering the full CG Approach in any platform area impacted the extent of integration. Furthermore, the structure of integrated delivery placed stress on staff who were stretched in their capacity due to insufficient resources. While the delivery of and engagement in learning, employment, family health and governance increased over the three years, growth model limitations on integrated practice included:

- Lack of dedicated community development staff and teams
- Lack of extended hours learning and activity teams
- Early years learning staff were shared across locations and grew slowly towards dedicated early years staff for each community – this was partly achieved during the period

- Funding for the health platform was secured in late 2018. Health funding did not include the fourth community that began operations in mid-2019
- Interest/Demand from First Nations people for employment could not be met
- Broad demands on staff – including delivery of their key area, community development and engagement and mentoring of staff new to employment
- Organisation's systems and structures were immature
- Operational resources such as vehicles were insufficient for community demand

Data presented in this section indicates that integrated service delivery has occurred across all service areas of the LWD platform and is particularly effective in some areas. Integration with and within the early learning and child health areas occurred frequently, and the integration of support for social/emotional wellbeing, governance, employment and community development projects worked effectively. The data also demonstrates that there are areas that require ongoing efforts and resources to increase the frequency and effectiveness of integrated practice.

Further improvements are required in growing and embedding internal integration, particularly in relation to adults and young people. There is also a need to mature integrated meetings, plans and actions. There have been challenges with maintaining regular data feedback loops to staff and communities; this would have contributed to integration effectiveness and efficiency (see section '*Principle: Expect and deliver the best*' for the barriers and enablers experienced in Monitoring & Evaluation).

An important element of Children's Ground's integrated practice is the intent that children and families will be able to engage with whatever part of the LWD platform they need. This can be achieved with staff working together internally and with 'supported referrals' to other local services.



## Collaboration with local services

The CG Approach seeks to achieve internal integration of services and collaboration and coordination within services/organisation across the local service system.

In 2017, Children's Ground's engagement with local services and organisations started small and grew to include various partnerships. There are extensive opportunities to expand this collaboration as resources and capacity improve. Children's Ground begins working in communities with a focus on the people and their vision and talent, rather than at a service organisation level. Through this, key service collaborations are identified.

To date, coordination and collaboration with local services has focused on:

- Child and family access to and engagement in clinical and other health services
- Key Alice Springs interagency collaborations including Connected Beginnings and Child Friendly Alice
- First Nations rights, leadership and cultural wellbeing for individuals, families, communities and the Arrernte nation
- Cultural health and governance collaboration
- Community development

Children's Ground engages with a diverse range of local services and organisations including local schools, land councils, outstation resource services, supermarkets, food wholesalers and housing organisations for environmental health projects. Resource limitations associated with implementation of the growth model, and historical local politics have restricted some collaborations.

See Appendix 6 for further details about collaboration with local services.

The small number (n=6) and diversity in types of local service providers who responded to the online survey meant that some data was too varied to present clear themes in relation to types of service coordination and collaboration. Some of this data is presented in Appendix 6 and should be read with caution as per the data note.

In evaluation interviews with local services, individuals described the successes and challenges of the local collaborations with Children's Ground to date.

These quotes do not represent the experiences of all local services interviewed.

## Successes

*"This is just the best place to be for me engaging with these priority populations. But there's something about them, they're so happy, they're so engaged and interested to learn. And I think it's maybe because it's in their homes or on country."*

*"Children's Ground has created this environment where it's a safe space kind of thing. And people are welcome to come and build that relationship with us [local service]."*

*"She [CG staff member] was the connection. She made me get off my bum and come out and do it [come into CG to deliver]. Which I'm more than happy to do. So, it's not always on my hit list, but it should be."*

*"Children's Ground has been very flexible, very positive about getting communities to engage with our service, and basically, just supporting that pathway from Children's Ground through to our clinical setting."*

*"For me, working with Children's Ground is a constant reminder about how genuine our community engagement needs to be and can be. It makes me think creatively about how we can achieve impact collectively."*

*In the beginning you got the sense that Children's Ground were going it alone. But since then, the ongoing efforts of their staff to engage with services and networks had contradicted this. The service system in this town, that I am a part of is a different paradigm to how Children's Ground thinks and works, but Children's Ground staff are living examples of trying to connect with this system, despite the differences.<sup>46</sup>*

*Once we started doing a lot of [health] education in learning, the flow on effect is we wanted to see the results of them being able to come in and get check-ups and how we look at the systems in place between us and Children's Ground. So, we have slots in our books every month for Children's Ground kids. Sometimes, due to all the challenges faced by our communities the day of appointment they may not show up, and that impacts our service as well. But it's about piloting this, we see what works, we work out the kinks and keep going.*

**Local service providers, 2020**

<sup>46</sup> Note: Statements without quotation marks required paraphrasing to de-identify the service and practitioner



One service provider reflected on the impact of Children's Ground on the local service landscape.

*"It's [Children's Ground] very much caused a ripple effect. People are realising. This is just from my observation, that services are realising the way you guys are doing Arrernte education, Western education in those early years is really effective. But also complement it with health coming in. So much so that I've had a request [from other local services] to start doing sessions with them and to come in and help set up some of these things. So, you can really see some other services are sitting up and listening to what's happening with what Children's Ground are doing."*

Local service provider, 2020

## Challenges

*A few times I went out on country with learning. And a couple of times at the centre. And then it [the collaboration] drifted away. X [CG staff member] left and we didn't make contact. We haven't made contact for a while. So, it needs somebody, including myself to make it systematic. The other thing was it was very hard actually... I could be onsite [for health promotion/testing] but they [kids/families] then had to come into our service, and that was a breakdown between how they get there.*

*"I think I relied on a relationship with X [CG staff member], rather than building relationships with the broader Children's Ground staff and teams."*

*There are mainstream services really wanting to work with Children's Ground and learn from what you are doing and have kids and families from their service be involved in what is going on at Children's Ground, but Children's Ground doesn't seem to have the time to focus on this. I know this is about their resources, but other services don't necessarily know this.*

Local service providers, 2020

Three of six service providers reflected on the current service landscape across Alice Springs. They noted duplication of services in some areas and a need for improved working relationships between existing organisations to better support children and families.

The service/organisation collaborations described in this section (and in Appendix 6) demonstrate that Children's Ground engages with a diverse range of local services and organisations within Central Australia. However, in evaluation interviews, four of six service providers noted that Children's Ground staff could be more actively involved in local service partnerships and activity.

The initial intensive period of turning family aspirations and plans (from the Walk, Talk & Act) into the CG Approach operations and action is the primary focus for at least the first 12-18 months. At times, the emphasis on establishing local First Nations governance and building relationships with families took priority over focusing resources and efforts on engaging with the local services. These findings from local service reports are consistent with findings from the evaluation of the CG Approach in Kakadu (2014-17).

While local service coordination and collaboration has increased over these first few years, this has taken longer than planned. The challenge of balancing the priorities of delivery and extensive engagement with local services will remain until adequate resources are secured.



## Summary

The data presented shows that Children's Ground has made progress in establishing the LWD integrated services platform, however there is significant development yet to occur to 'Deliver the whole, not the bits.' The findings demonstrate that Children's Ground has made progress in establishing both internal integration and collaboration with external services. When internal integration was achieved, it was reported an effective process. Similarly, local coordinated and collaborative practice was effective when it occurred. However, integration has not been comprehensive or systematic to date. Early-stage delivery, maturing processes and resource challenges impacted internal integration and establishing reciprocal service collaborations. These remain areas for improvement by focusing on maturing internal processes and standards to achieve more systemic and effective practices.



**Ingkerrenyeke apmerenye apurte-irreme apmerenge**  
(In community – place based)

This principle recognises that for children, families and the whole community to enjoy environments of inclusion, safety and cultural, social and economic capital, that it is important to take services, supports and governance (decision-making) to people, into their communities, where they live.

The principle of ‘in-community’ (placed-based) sets an operational standard that requires the CG Approach to be delivered where children live, owned by the community and becoming part of community life. Rather than a ‘service to’ – delivery is in and with communities. Over time, this builds upon the social, cultural and economic capital, shifting poorly resourced communities that face exclusion to well-resourced communities where opportunity is commonplace and is led by local people in their community.

It moves service delivery away from the usual paradigm of individuals seeking support outside their communities, or limited outreach offerings into communities.

As a growth model and newly emerging operation, Children’s Ground did not have sufficient resources to implement place-based delivery in each community. Therefore, Children’s Ground initially provided a ‘service to’ approach, delivering weekly sessions on country, at Children’s Ground’s central hub and at culturally connected places in Alice Springs township – which is not place-based delivery.

A key component of place-based delivery is having established intergenerational community centres to support delivery of the integrated platform and to promote and enable places of safety, learning, wellbeing and community life across generations.

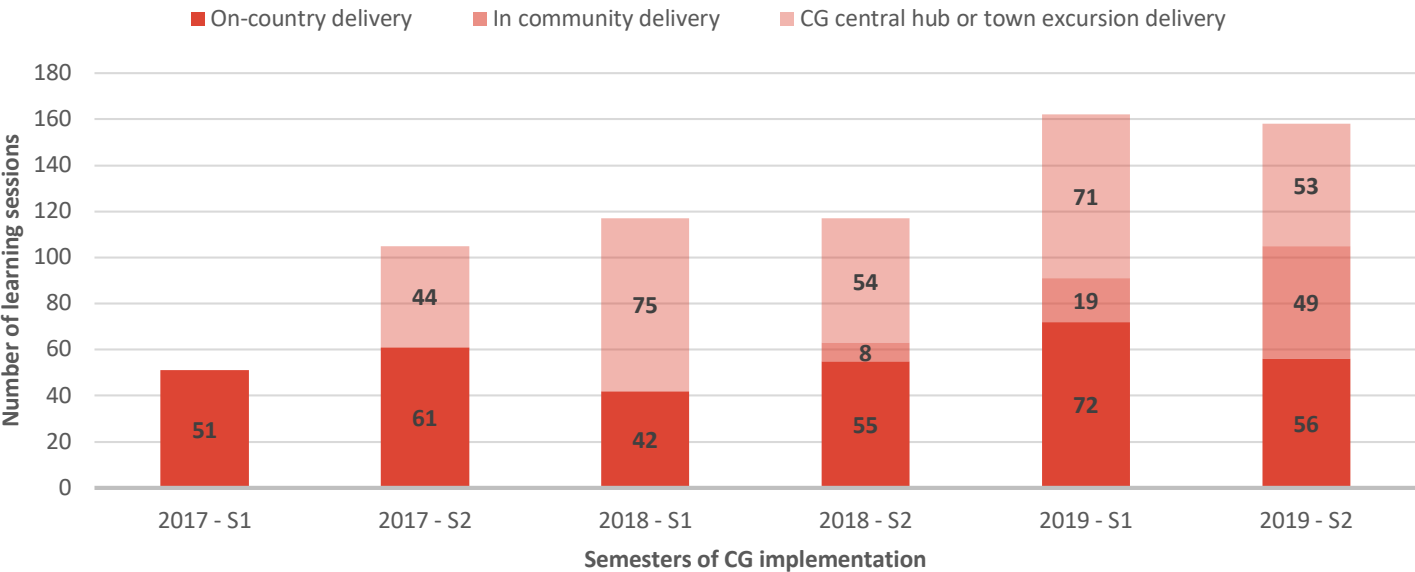
In the early stages of delivery, building social, cultural and economic capital in communities was not able to be achieved through a physical structure. Of the three communities Children’s Ground started working with, two communities had no infrastructure; one community had an existing local centre, but access for Children’s Ground was limited. When the fourth community began in 2019, they had a local community centre, also with limited access allowed.

Early years delivery occurred at the Children’s Ground central hub with a fit-for-purpose space established for learning. Place-based early learning delivery occurred in communities at locations identified by community leaders and included homes, creek beds, under shelters, public spaces and under trees. Applications for infrastructure investment in communities were unsuccessful during the period. Place-based delivery also includes delivery on country, where learning has always taken place for First Nations people.

See Appendix 6 for by community detail regarding place-based delivery.

Graph 3 shows an increase in place-based delivery over time. While still a work in progress, significant development occurred towards this principle. On-country delivery was prioritised from year one and continued over the period.

**Graph 3: Place-based delivery by year and semesters of implementation**







In evaluation interviews, when asked 'Have you seen Children's Ground work in this way [In-Community principle]?', 93% (n=27) of First Nations family/staff members responded 'yes'. Of these, 70% referred to Children's Ground delivery at community centres and in communities as being place-based and 63% referred to delivery on country as being place-based. The quotes below represent the strongest evaluation themes.

*"It's good to have Children's Ground in the community now – we can walk here."*

*"Children's Ground is always supporting families who are out on country, like for example, you've got Burt Creek, they live on their country so there's always somebody going out there."*

*"[describing Walk, Talk & Act] We first tell them how we got involved with the little ones here, and then we made a Children's Ground at the centre [in community] because we've got little ones there in the community. That's why we opened a Children's Ground there."*

*"It's been really good. Like, when we have the little ones on their country, do their little sessions out bush. And the Whitegate mob on theirs. And with Larapinta at that centre. Plus families are growing along with us too. It's real good for them to have Children's Ground out on the communities, like on the homelands too."*

*"We don't have enough money yet to get a demountable out there [Mpweringke Anapipe]. It'll be really good to have our place and people out there too, you know."*

*"I can't wait to see the school to be in existence – it's much needed. There is no school that we can say is ours, we are eager to pass on cultural learning and knowledge on our own. Freedom of speech. Freedom of knowledge. Teaching and passing on important knowledge."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

When asked 'Is there anything Children's Ground can do better or differently', no one reported anything beyond what is presented above.

## Summary

The findings show that over the first years of implementation Children's Ground was delivered through a centralised hub 'to' communities rather than being permanently 'in-community' as per the Approach. The extent of place-based delivery increased through additional resources. While delivery occurred in location with families, Children's Ground has been unable to deliver in-community at the pace requested by cultural governance. This was impacted by early-stage implementation, resources and lack of adequate community infrastructure. In one community, lack of secure tenure, lack of housing and basic essential services for forty years continues to be a significant barrier. A long-standing request of Elders to establish a school at Mpweringke Anapipe has yet to be actioned. The focus at the end of 2019 was to increase resources and move towards more established, place-based integrated services within each community.

Innovation –  
combining old  
and new

**Arne mpwaretyeke arrurle arle mpwarewarretyarte ante nthakenhe arle lyete arne mpwarewarreme arteke** (Always think about old ways and new ways of doing things)

This principle refers to recognition of First Nations knowledge systems and values as the oldest and most developed in the world; combining leading global knowledge, practice and innovation; creating a dynamic fusion.

*"Before Children's Ground, we had it all inside of us, locked away in us all the time. We were waiting for the right person to come along and bring it all out. We really trust Children's Ground. We tried to do this before but it just got broken up. Maybe they just want Australia to be a white country now."*

**Therese Ryder, Children's Ground Director**

The CG Approach responds to the local context, current global evidence and over 65,000 years of knowledge, recognising that each First Nations community has unique cultural, land, governance, language and kinship structures. In strategy and operations, the CG Approach is underpinned by three knowledge and practice systems, which aim to bring together the oldest knowledge and practice systems in the world with emerging global innovation.

The underpinning knowledge systems and evidence-bases are:

- First Nations systems of knowledge (pre-colonisation)
- Leading practice and pedagogy in First Nations practices post-colonisation
- Other global leading practice and pedagogy in relation to learning, health, wellbeing, community and economic development, governance and employment



Children's Ground has worked to visibly embed first language, culture and governance across each area of the integrated service platform. Progress within this principle has been process-based and enabled by increasing engagement of local First Nations people in employment and governance.

Significant attention has been given to achieving innovation and standards of excellence by promoting and revitalising pre-colonisation knowledge and practice through:

- Elder-led knowledge, training and development with next generation adults
- Arrernte learning curriculum development
- First language and culture resource development
- Arrernte-led child learning and wellbeing tools for observing and responding to progress
- Integrity of Arrernte learning practices such as learning on country
- Intergenerational training and development targeting four generations (Elders, adults, young people and children)

While Arrernte knowledge systems are privileged, they are augmented by Western and global innovation that is integrated through:

- Western trained specialists in education, health, community development, enterprise development and management
- Digital technologies in learning, art, storytelling and evaluation
- Engagement in national and international conferences for knowledge sharing and learning
- Western training and development, such as first aid, workplace OH&S and compliance







In the first years of the CG Approach, Elders and leaders in Central Australia decided that cultural teaching and learning needed to be the central focus through which Arrernte knowledge systems and practices (old ways) would be visibly embedded to pass on traditional knowledge and law. This emerged from their struggle over 50 years to gain sustained support from mainstream education systems to afford their children the right to be taught primarily in their first language and on their traditional lands.

*"I was very concerned about my children's education, so I decided, why can't we just try and see what we can do with Children's Ground. If it's going to work then let it work, because we've tried and tried... You know how we made that map - map of the timeline [refers to mapping the decades of attempts Arrernte people have made to have their children taught on their country and in their first language]? Yeah, so we've been trying for a long time. When my children were small too, you know, trying to educate our children our way. Because I had to go away to school. I've learned all the Western ways. And I came back and I share what I learnt to my next generations."*

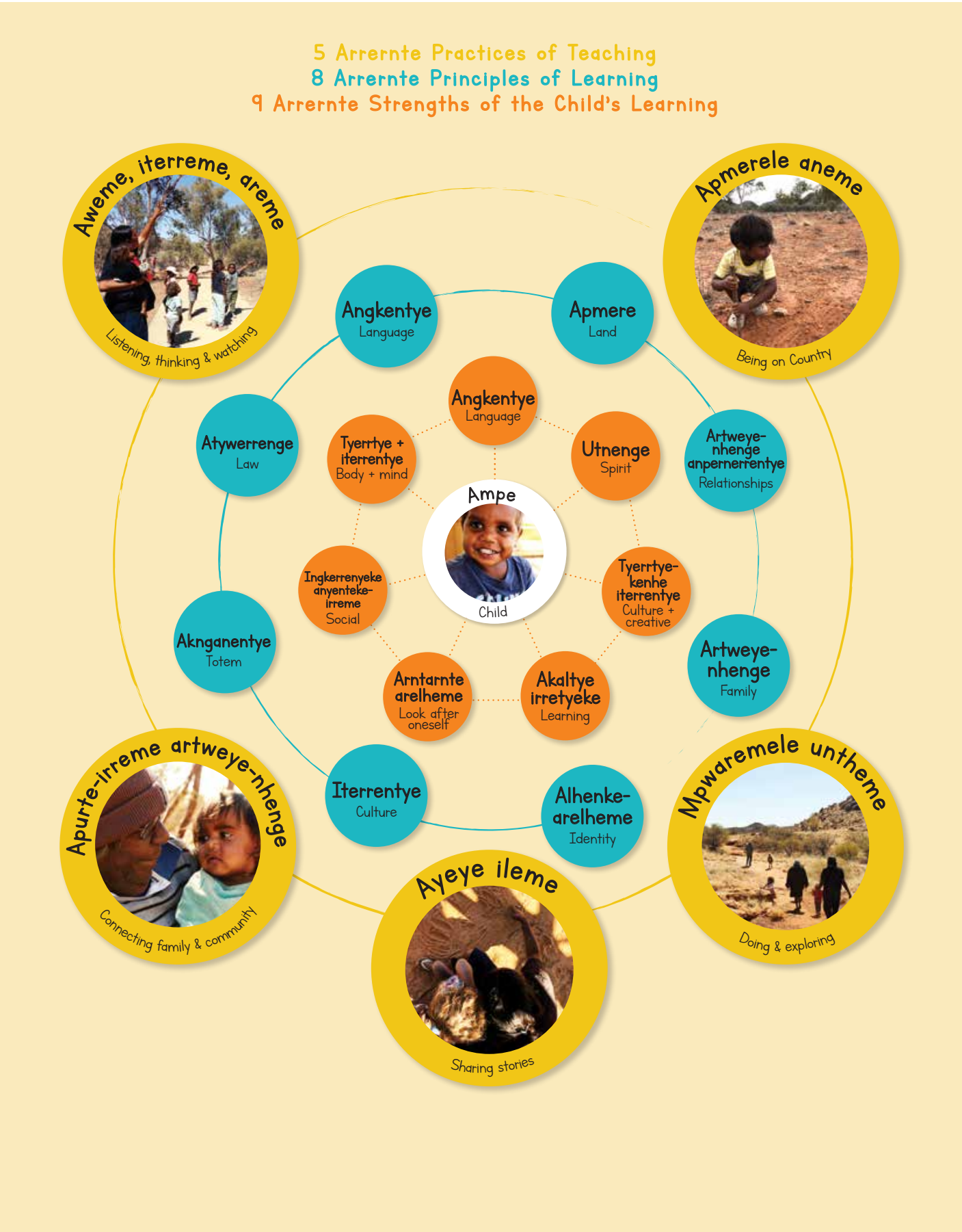
First Nations Leader, 2019

The integrity of Arrernte knowledge systems across the CG Approach is paramount. This aligns with leading practice in education and health and international evidence that children learn and develop best through their first language and culture. From the beginning, Children's Ground leaders dedicated early stage governance meetings to articulating their Arrernte Angkentye learning curriculum framework and teaching and learning practices (see Figure 12). This built on work by Arrernte educators over the past 30 years which included the 'Intelyapelyape curriculum' which was written in 1995 and continues to be excluded from mainstream education.

The Western National Early Years Learning Framework was reviewed against the Arrernte framework. It was found to be consistent with the Arrernte framework, but less extensive, integrated or holistic.

The Arrernte and Western early learning frameworks form the foundation for early learning as part of Children's Ground's 'Learning, Wellbeing and Development' integrated service platform (see Figure 11).

Figure 12: Arrernte Angkentye learning curriculum framework





Literacy in both English and first language was established as a key learning outcome for children. First Nations educators developed first language and culture literacy resources that are bilingual, published and digital for use in early learning sessions.

This principle has contributed to strengthening the cultural economy within communities and has been important for First Nations employment. It has demonstrated that First Nations knowledge and practice is equally remunerated next to Western trained knowledge and skills. Recognising the value of both 'old' and 'new' knowledge and skills is embodied in employment structures and processes as well as training content.

See Appendix 6 for more process data and information relating to how Arrernte knowledge systems and practices have been embedded in each platform area across the CG Approach.

In evaluation interviews, when asked 'Have you seen Children's Ground work in this way [Old and new principle]?', 89% (n=27) of First Nations family/staff members responded 'yes'. When asked 'How?', all responses related to how they are teaching and implementing various cultural practices and knowledge systems, including: Intergenerational learning; Elders leading teaching and learning; Teaching identity (country, skin, kinship systems); Teaching cultural stories and practices (bush food and medicine, knowing the country and ancestors); and Family being together. There was a recognition that the First Nations and Western-trained staff need to work together to achieve innovation in delivering the old and new ways.

These quotes represent the strongest evaluation themes.

*"Like when we go out on country, we teach them the old ways too, you know. The old and new together."*

*"New way is you guys [Western-trained staff], behind us and we are leading. Kids are learning Western ways and our traditional ways – out bush, at centre – they learn both at the same time."*

*"We still can do it the old ways, but we're still learning the new ways. The old ways, we can still teach them, you know, like for example, living on country, learning the old traditions, learning what the old people – we have been taught. In the new way that we are doing now, it's just something that we haven't done before."*

*"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. And teaching them to staff as well. There's a few little signs you see in staff [non-First Nations] and you just think – other people's world is different. But we should really be out there and teaching other people that – through the eyes of Aboriginal people."*

*"I tell my children, tell my families, because old people taught me how to respect land, country and language and people. Just like that going back to that old way of respecting people."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

When asked 'Is there anything Children's Ground can do better or differently' to achieve this practice principle, 22% of people responded with areas for improvement and concerns including (the following responses were provided by 1-3 people):

- Health of Elders – there are times when they are not well enough to lead
- Increased use of technology in early learning
- Some First Nations staff are still hesitant to lead
- Strengthened delivery of 'the new' is needed



## Summary

The data presented in this section demonstrates that over the first three years of implementing the CG Approach, Children's Ground has begun establishing an innovative approach that includes both cultural and Western approaches within the service platform and within key organisational systems. There remain areas that require strengthening. The initial focus on 'old ways' and privileging First Nations knowledge and practice was evident and strengthened over time. Largely, this principle has been implemented as intended within the resources available. A significant contribution to this has been First Nations employment and governance. This has been complemented by Western trained staff working in respectful partnership, using their expertise in the context of First Nations systems.

Expect and deliver the best

## Iwenheke apeke unte lyernpenye unte anthetyeke (Expect and deliver the best)

This principle sets the standard for excellence that all children and families deserve to enable long-term wellbeing. It aims to provide the best resources and services applicable to each situation. It encourages Children's Ground to communicate and operate in a way that makes it clear that they expect and encourage the best of all people involved (staff, children, families).



The full CG Approach was designed for adequate and high-quality services, delivered in the communities where children and families live. 'Expect and deliver the best' includes embedding excellence in delivery with high-quality standards and adequate resources at all levels of Children's Ground as an organisation.

First Nations people do not receive the same standard in and access to services or economic inclusion as the rest of Australia. Since colonisation, First Nations people have been subjected to genocide and racist systems and policies that have resulted in entrenched structural exclusion and injustice. People deserve and should expect the best of resources and standards for their children and families.

As a new operation, it was expected that quality and excellence would grow over time as resources increase, as practices mature and as expertise is built. The Chairperson of Children's Ground states:

*"This has never been done before; we are laying a new path. In the context of creating a new system and a new service, it is expected that achieving excellence and delivering the best will be a work in progress. Monitoring progress and standards and having a quality improvement process across the organisation is critical for Children's Ground to continue to work towards meeting the standards of this principle."*

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

This section briefly describes progress with establishing processes for excellence in delivery. See Appendix 6 for more detail about the extent to which Children's Ground

has started establishing standards of excellence, and where continued efforts and resources are required.

A number of factors impacted the ability of Children's Ground to achieve the best and deliver excellence:

- Beginning as a growth model with limited resources for delivery, employment, training and engagement
- It takes time to build and embed excellence across all elements of the CG Approach (this was also found in Kakadu West Arnhem with the implementation of the full model)
- The geographic diversity of communities (town and homelands) and logistics
- The everyday priorities and needs of First Nations staff and families living with ongoing health and other personal crises. This reduced capacity for delivery, planning and engagement. It also created tension between prevention and crisis response and the time and resources required (diverting time and resource focus from prevention and children)

From interviews with staff and management, Children's Ground has effectively achieved high quality and excellence in delivery in the following key areas:

- Community leadership and standards
- Teaching and learning standards (First Nations and Western)
- Nutrition, food and health and wellbeing safety standards
- Local policy development with First Nations staff
- Professional development and training
- Regular and effective communication
- Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)
- Organisational backbone support

Appendix 6 provides full detail on each of these.



When First Nations family/staff members were asked 'Have you seen Children's Ground work in this way [Excellence principle]?', the responses were varied with small numbers reporting each. While not considered strong or clear themes, their responses about Children's Ground expecting and delivering the best included:

- 37% reported cultural teaching and learning as achieving excellence
- 33% reported everyone working and planning together
- 15% reported compliance and safety

When asked 'Is there anything Children's Ground can do better or differently?', the general consensus from the varied responses was that Children's Ground was doing well in some areas of expecting and delivering the best, but there is room for improvement.

The quotes below are based only on each individual's perspective. They are not representative of strong themes. They include the strengths and challenges in working towards achieving this principle.

*"You have to be really confident, you know. You've got to deliver it the way you deliver and expect it's going to be like... make sure everything's best for children and families."*

*"I think it is because we don't have the staff on board at the moment, and there is a lot of things that we are just doing a bit of."*

*"We have got this principle of we deliver the best, and everything has to be around best practice. All of this compliance stuff is really about best practice, but it is also about protecting people."*

*"We need more workers to build capacity, not having enough is just hard."*

*"We've got to be there all the time with them [the children], supervising them. And be with them all the time. Never let them out of our sight. We've got to be there with them, doing our best to do what they want to do, the little ones."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

In evaluation focus groups, Western-trained staff articulated that this principle was impacted by the lack of resources and the time it takes to establish and embed high quality practice and local processes.

Despite challenges, there was evidence that high quality standards of practice for learning and wellbeing were being upheld.

*"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

A key finding from this evaluation is that standards of excellence are yet to be achieved, but that it takes time to build high-quality standards in a new operation and across communities. Over the first three years, the expectation of excellence was highlighted and over time, standards were developed and monitored through increased, formalised and maturing procedures. The evidence suggests that there needs to be an ongoing focus on establishing and embedding standards and processes towards achieving this principle.

*Assume  
and celebrate  
ability*

**Mwarrentye arle arne mpwareme renhe tnaketyeke** (Use and celebrate people's ability and strength)

This principle recognises the ability of children, families and communities. It builds upon people's strength and moves away from the deficit focus that drives many policies and programs. Celebrating the ability of people and creating the conditions for people to express their talents underpins this principle.

In First Nations communities, there is a history of service delivery that focuses on deficits and crisis. The deficit paradigm has been established against Western benchmarks that are elusive in First Nations communities due to structural and racial barriers that diminishes First Nations cultures. This forces First Nations community members into a permanent power imbalance and perpetuates both a stereotypical narrative and status quo of the 'Aboriginal problem.'

Assuming ability is inherent in the CG Approach, recognising the talent in both children and families. Engaging this talent includes placing power and decision-making in the hands of the people and communities, so they are leading their own services and solutions. This changes the relationship that people previously had with services – from one of being a recipient to one of being in control.

People don't come to Children's Ground because they have a problem. They come to connect with family. They come to offer their expertise, leadership and talent. Importantly, when people are trusted to design, deliver and evaluate the services intended to support their own children, families and community, there is an increase in engagement, local leadership, employment and cultural standards and safety.

Children's Ground operationalises this principle through:

- Privileging and embedding first language, culture, knowledge systems and practice
- Culturally based roles to ensure employment of local cultural experts with long histories of unemployment
- Community leadership and governance – cultural and Western
- Regular family and community events and celebrations
- An individualised, strength-based approach to learning and wellbeing where every child is regarded as talented and able to learn at the highest standards
- A no failure and non-punitive approach to services to ensure people are empowered in employment, leadership, learning and health

When First Nations family/staff members were asked 'Have you seen Children's Ground work in this way [Strengths-based principle]?', the responses were varied and minimal. However, when asked if 'Children's Ground respects and honours First Nations culture?', 100% responded with 'yes'. These quotes are representative of the strongest themes.

*"I just see it in people's strengths and just not talking about what they cannot do, more of what they can do and it's really good here."*

*"We are employing Aboriginal people to work here, and their skills are the skills that we are giving them credit for. It is not the Western skill. It is the Arrernte capability... all Arrernte based, all about the [Arrernte] people, culture, telling stories... it [culture] is everywhere."*

*"I've learnt confidence - going to conferences - because I used to be really shy. Couldn't talk to anybody in public. Now, I can just be on stage and just talk, talk, talk."*

*"Our families are being respected for their ways of doing things here. It's not just here, it's up in the Top End too, you know. Children's Ground is respecting that and we respect the Western way too. So both ways."*

*"I feel comfortable walking in at Children's Ground. Because you've got families here, and some staff [non-First Nations] that's learning to speak Arrernte too."*

*"It's great to be listened to and valued."*

*"Staff are really supported and there is a lot of recognition of the staff when they do things that are special... It is just a really nice place to work... You do feel like you are valued."*

*"I really like Children's Ground. They always respect our thing, you know, like culture and all that. How we - like in Arrernte thing way, always respect us and we respect them too."*

*"They respect us at Children's Ground. Got a lot of support from here. And our culture's growing and growing and growing."*

Family/Staff members, 2019





Of those interviewed, 63% of people linked their culture and language being respected and visible with feeling comfortable to work and engage in Children's Ground spaces and environments.

When asked 'Is there anything Children's Ground can do better or differently?', everyone responded 'no' with general comments and consensus that Children's Ground was effectively working towards and achieving this principle.

Children's Ground staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) and local services were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that 'Children's Ground recognises and celebrates the strength of culture and community'.

- 96% of staff (n=23) agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (65%)
- 83% of local services (n=6) agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (50%)

## Summary

The data presented in this section and the coming employment section demonstrates that Children's Ground has made positive progress in working in line with this principle. However, the minimal responses from First Nations families/staff to the initial question about 'assuming and celebrating ability,' compared with the overwhelming responses to Children's Ground respecting First Nations culture, suggests that the language of this principle may need to be reviewed with communities.

## Stay for the long-term

### Akweke itnekenge akwete anetyeke itnenhenhe amangelhe-ilenhemele (Stay with them and grow with them until they are big)

This principle moves away from a traditional 'quick fix' approach and promotes the support of children from and for 0 to 25 years – ensuring all major transition periods are supported. Building whole of community change across a generation to achieve long term economic, social and cultural wellbeing.

Children's Ground has a long-term vision for a sustained, generational approach over 25 years that works and walks with children, their families and their communities from their earliest years, throughout primary and secondary education and into their early adult years. This approach and principle underpin the strategic and operational planning for Children's Ground. While the longevity of the CG Approach can only be assessed over time, progress towards sustainable operations is monitored.

In Central Australia to date, indicators of progress made towards achieving the principle of 'Stay for the long-term' have included:

- Continual strengthening and embedding of community and regional level governance and leadership
- Growth in funding and delivery over time towards implementation of the full CG Approach
- Increasing local First Nations employment, within the resources of a growth model
- Increasing place-based delivery
- Increasing child and family engagement

In working towards achieving this principle, Children's Ground applied learnings from previous operations in Kakadu West Arnhem where this principle was not able to be met. These learnings included reducing dependence on a single funder, strengthening authority of representative local community governance structures (not just those with funding capability), and a separation between funders and influence on operational delivery.

In Central Australia, authority is provided through First Nations governance structures that include Traditional Owners, Elders and community leaders for each community and collectively. Collective First Nations governance structures mitigate the risk of single person/entity and minority group influences.



55 | Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia)

In evaluation interviews, First Nations family/staff members understandably found it challenging to respond to how Children's Ground was going in working towards this principle. These quotes are from individuals and are not representative of strong evaluation themes.

*"We are always thinking about the long-term – I reckon we will make it there."*

*"This is hard – this is sticking to it for the long haul. That's why it is community led, because it has to be community in it for the long haul."*

*"It is good for all of us at the Children's Ground. For the little ones. The next or the third or fourth generation, are still to come to Children's Ground."*

*"We need to stay for generations, the little ones are our generations. They are our future. They're our leaders. Soon, they're going to be leaders, you know. Leading the way."*

*"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."*

*"There seems to be a lot of philanthropic people that are keen to see change, and can see that this is a different model approach which has a potential to work because of the way that it is being implemented... We are actually listening to the people who are being affected... not just doing things to Aboriginal people... I don't want to be watching these kids grow up seeing the same stuff going on... So we have got to shake it up."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

### Summary

The data presented in this section demonstrates that key foundations for working with children and their families within community over 25 years are in place.

As noted, Children's Ground's effectiveness in implementing this principle can only be assessed over time.



# Western process analysis

## How has the CG Approach been implemented as intended, in the context of a 'growth model', compared to the full CG Approach?

Children's Ground has now established services in two operational contexts. The first was in Kakadu West Arnhem, where the full model was established over three years with a population in a discrete geographic boundary. This contrasts with the first three years of the second in Central Australia, with implementation of a developmental growth model with four communities in the context of a larger town population and remote outstations. The two operational models enable Children's Ground to understand and evidence the process effectiveness and impact of the development model compared to the full model and to evaluate the application of the CG Approach in diverse settings. There have been reinforced learnings across both operational contexts and unique learnings from each.

The CG Approach clearly articulates a set of principles for both governance and delivery. Local governance has allowed the development and implementation of the Approach to respond to local conditions. At the same time, the clearly defined service platform and organisational structures provide operational clarity.

Overall, this evaluation report demonstrates that over this period, the CG Approach has been implemented effectively and as intended to a degree, but not to the extent desired within the full model of the CG Approach.



## In community, locally led design and delivery

Western research evidence highlights the importance of involving users in the design and delivery of services as a way of reforming public services.<sup>47 48 49 50 51</sup> The research shows that services are more effective, and that people's needs are better met when they are involved in an equal and reciprocal relationship with service professionals and systems. In Australia, the need for First Nations people to be at the forefront of service design and delivery has been recommended through decades of inquiries and increasingly emerging in research.<sup>52 53 54 55 56</sup>

The CG Approach is First Nations-led and designed. In practice and concept, it is also informed by and aligned with global leading practice and Western research into evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes for young children and families, especially those who are most vulnerable.

The evaluation findings show that a strong focus in the early stage of operations built local decision making, relationships, trust and empowerment with people. This relational approach started with a dedicated community engagement process of listening, reflecting, discussing and planning, through which community leaders were identified, followed by active empowerment of local people. As the direct beneficiaries, local voices are respected and structurally empowered through local governance and employment. In both Central Australia and Kakadu West Arnhem, the authority of local people resulted in culturally designed and responsive delivery – in which the role of senior cultural Elders was instrumental in establishing community leadership, trust and confidence.

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. In Central Australia, 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.

47 Bradwell, P. and Marr, S. 2008. Making the most of collaboration: an international survey of public service co-design. Demos Report No. 23. London, UK: Demos

48 Boyle, D., Coote, A., Sherwood, C. and Slay, J. 2010. Right Here, Right Now: Taking co-production into the mainstream. London, UK: nef foundation

49 Gannon, Z. and Lawson, N. 2008. Co-production: The modernisation of public services by staff and users. London, UK: Compass

50 Thorpe, A., Arabena, K., Sullivan, P., Silburn, K. & Rowley, K. 2016. Engaging First Peoples: A Review of Government Engagement Methods for Developing Health Policy, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

51 Donahue, J.D. and Zeckhauser, R.J. 2011. Collaborative Governance: Private Roles for Public Goals in Turbulent Times. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

52 Hunt J 2013. Engaging with Indigenous Australia—exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Issues paper no. 5. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies

53 Stephens, L., Ryan-Collins, J. and Boyle, D. 2008. Co-production: A manifesto for growing the core economy. London, UK: new economics foundation (nef)

54 Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2020. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2020

55 Wilson, B. 2013. A share in the future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory

56 Productivity Commission for the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2020. Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2020.





Western research also links the importance of community leadership and decision making in providing community-based services where people live, ensuring services are linguistically, socially and culturally accessible and relevant to those they are designed for.<sup>57 58</sup>

***Formal service systems have a culture of their own, and for parents to make good use of it requires them to master the language, roles and values of that culture<sup>59</sup>.***

***Most families learn these skills from their parents, but many do not, and these families make little or no use of the available services<sup>60</sup>.***

This evaluation reinforced findings from Kakadu West Arnhem that the principle and practice of 'Child, family and community-led' and 'In-community' delivery are critical enablers of effective community service delivery. Local governance ensured operations were responsive to lived realities, priorities and culture. This, along with providing access to services where people live drove engagement. The relationship between community led, placed based delivery and participation were reinforcing. Together, they enabled the early impact and progress achieved across the remaining principles.

Local design of culturally safe services shifted delivery from a Western deficit/problem focus to a strength-based foundation. From this foundation, engagement in Western and global knowledge systems was achieved. This is most notable in the Arrernte Angkentye Early Years Learning curriculum framework designed by Arrernte educators and the requirement of services to be partly on-country as the foundation for First Nations knowledge systems. This reinforced the learning and wellbeing of children being delivered in the language and cultural context of the learner, providing an empowered environment. This contrasts with Western learning systems that place First Nations children in a foreign language and learning environment resulting in poor learning outcomes for children<sup>61</sup>.

Being empowered to navigate, use and understand services as well as place-based delivery were both strengthened through the principles of 'Combining the old and new ways' and 'Use and celebrate people's ability'. These enabled clear standards and outcomes to be set in cultural and Western processes and approaches. These begin with the strengths of children and families as the service designers and deliverers.

57 Wear, A. 2007. Place-based partnerships in Victoria. Public Administration Today, Issue 12 (July-September), 20-26

58 Moore, T.G. and Fry, R. 2011. Place-based Services: A Literature Review. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health

59 Sobo, E.J., Seid, M. and Gelhard, L.R. 2006. Parent-identified barriers to pediatric health care: A process-oriented model Health Services Research, 41 (1)

60 Centre for Community Child Health & The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. 2011. Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project

61 UNESCO. 2001. Education and Cultural Diversity: [www.unesco.org/education](http://www.unesco.org/education)



## Universal and equitable access

Children's Ground's integrated Learning, Wellbeing & Development service platform is operationalising a universal service model with internal integration and collaboration with external services. The integrated platform is consistent with findings from Western evidence for universal service models that provide a strong and inclusive set of services with delivery based on equity rather than equality alone. Research recommends that these should be backed by a tiered system of secondary and tertiary services that enable varying levels of additional support to be provided to those with particular needs.<sup>62 63 64 65</sup>

The siloed and narrowly focused service delivery of Western systems creates a range of barriers.

***"...families at risk often access services and support that are crisis-led and are focused on the immediate presenting issue. This narrow approach fails to help those families who have multiple needs and require simultaneous support from a range of services<sup>66</sup>."***

A literature review by the Centre for Community Child Health identified that the structural systems within which organisations are delivering services make it difficult to achieve truly integrated systems:

***"The ability of services to make structural changes has been hampered by the conditions under which they work. Whilst the general thrust of various initiatives has been to improve the coordination between services, the traditional system does not easily lend itself to integrate<sup>67</sup>."***

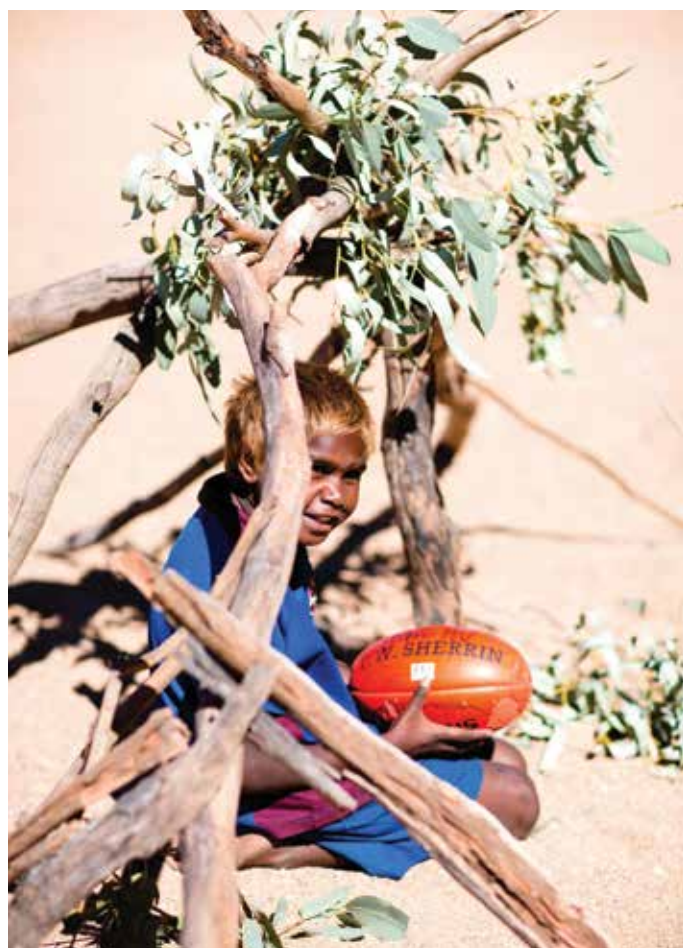
The implementation of the CG Approach in Central Australia aligns with leading recommendations from Western research evidence and national inquiries in relation to service design for children and families living with complex intergenerational inequity and disadvantage.<sup>68 69</sup>

Barriers for First Nations people in mainstream systems are exacerbated by designs from non-First Nations people that lack cultural understanding, safety and integrity. For First Nations people in remote and regional communities, significant linguistic barriers compound poor service efficacy.

In stepping outside of the confines of the existing service systems, Children's Ground designed a new model for service integration using a First Nations whole of life and whole of community world view to guide standards in integrated delivery. First Nations people have clear laws and systems of knowledge and practice. These laws are not written; they are practiced and exist across all

First Nations.<sup>70 71</sup> The CG Approach draws from these systems and the guidance of Elders and key works published by Elders and senior cultural people.<sup>72 73 74</sup> The land, people, health, education, law and society are connected through complex structures and laws that are interdependent. This is translated directly into the principles of 'Deliver the whole not the bits', 'Assume and celebrate ability' and 'Child, family and community-led'.

Evidence from this evaluation demonstrates that the CG Approach reduced barriers to engagement through a culturally informed integration of services, responding to multiple and complex needs. The integration of services allowed multiple entry points to engagement for children and families. This engagement affirmed the connections that First Nations systems create between health, education, family, culture, community and law. The findings also highlighted that further strengthening of integration is needed as service capacity increases.



62 Boston Consulting Group. 2008. National Early Childhood Development Strategy: Report to the ECD Subgroup of the Productivity Agenda Working Group, COAG. Sydney and Melbourne, Australia: Boston Consulting Group

63 Moore, T.G. 2008. Rethinking universal and targeted services. CCCH Working Paper 2 (August 2008). Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health

64 Landy, S. and R. Menna. 2006. Early Intervention with Multi-Risk Families: An Integrative Approach. Baltimore, Maryland, Paul H. Brookes

65 Social Exclusion Task Force. 2007. Reaching Out: Think Family. Analysis and themes from the Families At Risk Review. London, UK: Social Exclusion Task Force, Cabinet Office

66 Centre for Community Child Health & The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. 2011. Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project

67 Centre for Community Child Health & The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. 2011. Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project

68 Moore, T. McDonald, M., McHugh-Dillon, H and West, S.. 2016 Community engagement A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families; The Australian Institute of Family Studies, CFCA Paper No. 39

69 Barnes, J., Katz, I.B., Korbin, J.E. and O'Brien, M. 2006. Children and Families in Communities: Theory, Research, Policy and Practice. Chichester, East Sussex: John Wiley and Sons

70 Arrernte: Altjerre (pronounced al-cher-a) the creation of the world and the ting in it and its eternal existence; Eastern and Central Arrernte to English Dictionary; 1994, IAD Press

71 Yankunytjatjara and Pitjantjatjara: Tjukurpa (pronounced 'chook-orr-pa') is the foundation of Anangu culture. It is the traditional law that tells us how to care for one another and the land that supports us. It tells of the relationships between people, plants, animals and the physical features of the land. Parks Australia; <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru/discover/culture/tjukurpa/>

72 Turner, M.K. 2010. Iwenhe Tyerretye - What it means to be an Aboriginal person; IAD Press

73 Wallace, K. K., and Lovell, J.. 2009. Listen deeply : let these stories in; IAD Press

74 Dobson, V. P.. 2007. Arelhe-Kenhe Merrethene : Arrernte traditional healing; IAD Press

## Prevention and early intervention

Significant global research highlights the importance of the early years for future wellbeing, particularly in children who experience early childhood stress and trauma.<sup>75 76 77 78</sup>

***“The earlier in life that prevention and intervention can begin, the greater the opportunity for shifting children’s developmental pathways in a positive direction”<sup>79</sup>.”***

The CG Approach includes a deliberate focus on the next generation of children, providing them with the opportunities for life-long wellbeing and recognising that this begins in early childhood. The intention is to prevent and mitigate the ‘gap of disadvantage’. Children’s Ground’s approach to early childhood is reflective of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system theory that children’s development has multiple influences, including family (immediate and extended), peers and cultural, social and economic life, community (immediate and surrounding neighbourhood and service systems) and broader systems and political environments<sup>80</sup>.

The evaluation evidence shows that children and their families had access to critical services known to increase children’s life opportunities including early childhood education, health literacy and health promotion, family employment and affirmation of children’s culture and identity. The integration of cultural, social, physical health, mental health, skills and knowledge in early learning, employment and community environments established standards and practices for children to achieve key cultural and Western health and learning outcomes. These preventative measures are enabled by Children’s Ground’s principles of ‘Starting early’ with a focus on early years development from pre-birth, and ‘Deliver the whole not the bits’. It is complemented by the principle ‘Assume and celebrate ability’ which ensures a focus on prevention through the strengths and abilities of children to learn and grow and a move away from deficit discourse and practice.

This evaluation demonstrates that children and families experienced improved equity in access to services with increased engagement of children and families in preventative health promotion and early intervention critical to early childhood learning and wellbeing – and that this was achieved systematically through integrated service delivery (‘Deliver the whole not the bits’). Initial engagement of a critical mass of children in each community has been an important foundation for whole of community prevention. Over time, this will provide important evidence regarding long term individual and community level change.

## Quality and integrity

This evaluation shows that, in Central Australia, the CG Approach has been implemented with integrity and achieved progress in systems, service and practice change as the key conditions and drivers of early impact. Further resourcing and improvements are required to achieve the standards of ‘Expect and deliver the best.’ While the evaluation found that the expectation of high quality was held within the organisation, the delivery of ‘excellence’ was compromised with the organisation being in a ‘start up’ phase. This included a lack of personnel and operational resources, immature systems and high demands for engagement that could not be matched nor supported by available resources. The evaluation demonstrates that quality standards need adequate financial resources and time to embed systems and processes. While resource constraints were particular to Central Australia, other challenges in achieving excellence were consistent with findings from Kakadu West Arnhem.

In daily practice, two phrases emerged from both Kakadu and Central Australia operations that relate to early implementation of the CG Approach and working towards ‘Expect and deliver the best’. The first, ‘hurry up and wait’, refers to the need to implement the CG Approach as quickly as possible to address demand, while taking the time to ensure engagement, decision making and empowerment of users from diverse linguistic, geographic and cultural contexts. This phrase also speaks to keeping a balance between long term prevention and addressing immediate, persistent crises and stress that contribute to hardship and barriers. Meeting standards of excellence continues to be a work in progress, supported by the focus on the equal importance of processes and output.

The other phrase that arose was ‘building the ship and sailing it at the same time.’ In both Central Australia and Kakadu, establishing operations while delivering in a complex, high need environment, occasionally resulted in pressure and conflict between delivery and establishing the organisation’s structural systems and processes. In Central Australia, this was compounded by limited staffing and operational resources. While Central Australia did benefit from systems, policies and experiences established in Kakadu, it was necessary to take the time to make these relevant to local contexts.

This process evaluation demonstrates that the processes of the CG Approach can be scaled for diverse contexts for broader systems change. When the key principles underpinning the Approach are implemented with integrity, either at full scale as in Kakadu or through a growth model as in Central Australia, they enable empowerment, access and equity in services.

75 Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. 2004. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from pre-school to end of key stage 1. Nottingham, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skills

76 Heckman J. 2006. Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. Science; 312(5782):1900-2

77 Waldfogel J. 2004. Social mobility, life chances, and the early years. London: London School of Economics

78 Silburn SR, Nutton G, Arney F, Moss B.. 2011. The First 5 Years: Starting Early. Topical paper commissioned for the public consultations on the Northern Territory Early Childhood Plan. Darwin: Northern Territory Government

79 Silburn SR, Nutton G, Arney F, Moss B.. 2011. The First 5 Years: Starting Early. Topical paper commissioned for the public consultations on the Northern Territory Early Childhood Plan. Darwin: Northern Territory Government

80 Bronfenbrenner, U.. 1979. The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.





Platypus

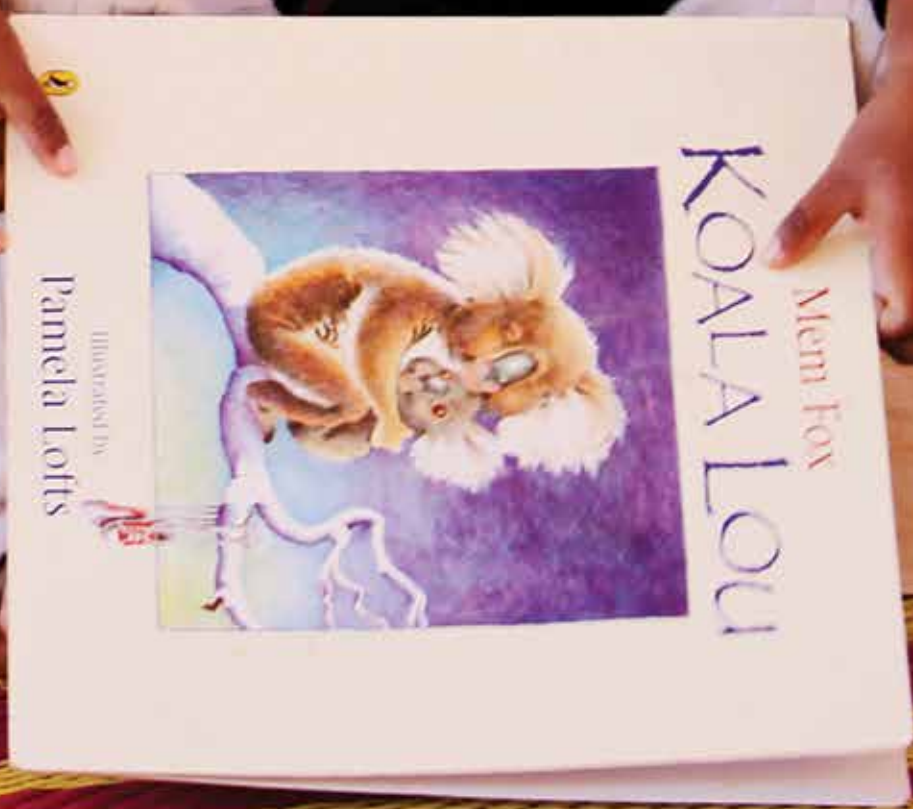


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Illustrated by  
Pamela Lott

# Impact findings and analysis:

## What change and impact occurred within Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe?

Children’s Ground has a 25-year longitudinal evaluation with nine high level outcomes and progress measures to achieve these outcomes over time (see Appendix 2 for full detailed evaluation framework and progress indicators). The following presents the key progress indicators for the evaluation period.

	Children and young people			
Aspirations	Children are thriving-engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities			
Headline indicator	Families are walking alongside their children			
High level outcomes	Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures	Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning & are creative problem solvers	Children are healthy	Children are happy
	Children have increased access to and engagement in First Cultural early years learning	Children have increased access to and engagement in high quality early years learning	Children have increased access to health promotion	Children have increased access to social and emotional wellbeing and literacy
Progress measures				
Access & Engagement	A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early years learning	No. of children engaged in health promotion	No. of children engaged in SEWB	
YEAR 1-3	No. of children (3-5 years) engaging in early years learning (progressing towards Universal Access)			

### Establishing access and engagement

Over the first years of implementing the CG Approach, there was a significant focus on empowerment through governance and achieving access and engagement in the five integrated service areas. The first years also focussed on setting the organisational processes and infrastructure for long term change and sustainability.

At this stage of evaluation, progress towards impact is expected to be modest in the context of early stage and growth operations.

Family		Community		
Families feel confident about their children’s wellbeing and future. They feel involved and empowered in their children’s learning, wellbeing and development and their own ability to create environments of safety		Communities enjoy economic, cultural and social strength and opportunity. Local Governance is strong and inclusive. People care for each other and provide a safe environment for every child		
Families are involved in their child’s learning, wellbeing and development	Families are socially and economically strong	The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing	The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity	Communities are safe and inclusive
No. of children have families participating alongside them in learning, health and development	Families have increased access to health promotion and support Families have increased economic opportunities and support	First Nations governance is established, inclusive and active (No. people & meetings) Community engages in cultural teaching and learning	Community has increased access to economic and employment opportunities	Community has access to cultural and physically safe intergenerational environments Community enjoys social and cultural events, activities and celebrations
No. of families involved in their community alongside their children	No. of families engaged in health promotion and economic opportunities	Community reports improvement in empowerment	Community engaged in economic opportunities	Community reports improved cultural and physical safety Prevalence of social stress



# Key Impact Findings - Summary

*"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

This evaluation report has evidenced that Children's Ground made early stage progress in improving education and health for children in their early years and strengthening economic, social and cultural capital in families and communities.

Many who actively engaged with Children's Ground over the first three years created a new normal for their children and families; where engaging in early learning, health and employment became a regular occurrence; where their language and culture are respected, valued and enacted around them: and where they feel empowered in decisions for their children, their life and their future. The evaluation found that this was a new experience for families.

Children's Ground's systems reform seeks to create the conditions required for sustained change and impact over a generation (25 years). After three years of implementing a growth model, Children's Ground is still in very early days of establishing, evidencing and embedding sustained systems change. However, early change and impact has been evidenced by increased equity in access to and engagement in education, health, employment, cultural and social life.

The process and early impact evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that key foundations for system change have been put in place and early changes were observed. Ongoing delivery and growth in resources are required to strengthen these foundations and to enable sustained change.

## Changes for children

A new cohort of children aged 0-5 years engaged in early years learning - 223 children who were previously rarely or not engaged.	A critical mass (82%) of children 0-5 years engaged in cultural and Western early years learning.	A majority of children progressed against their cultural and Western learning and developmental milestones.
All children engaged in early years learning alongside their family.	224 children (0-5 years) engaged in targeted preventative health promotion.	A majority of families reported improvements in children's physical and emotional wellbeing.

## Changes for families

People chronically unemployed are working - with 59 local First Nations people employed. 34% had never worked before and 84% were not working when they started at Children's Ground.	487 family members (18+ years) engaged in health promotion and support.	100% of families/staff reported increased access to services for physical and emotional health and wellbeing.
Over 560 family members of all ages engaged in community events and celebrations - the beginning foundations of building social inclusion and capital.	100% of families reported increased activities and opportunities for children and families to spend time together.	100% of families reported families are 'walking alongside their children' more.

## Changes for community

***In total, 978 people of all ages engaged in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe***

<i>"There's been a lot of changes. People are willing to talk up... there's more families wanting to work."</i>	<i>"People feel engaged and empowered to make decisions and contribute."</i>	<i>"Everyone is involved in decision making here - not like before - no one asked us so we didn't bother."</i>
<i>"...we go out to [communities] where they have been just doing nothing... but that's been changed now. Like, for Children's Ground to be out there, they are doing stuff now."</i>	<i>"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."</i>	<i>"Families are getting together - everyone listens and joins in. Nobody is the boss - everyone is involved and contributes. Not like in other places where no one feels like they are making decisions."</i>

# Change and impact for children

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework identified four key outcome areas for children:

- **Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers**
- **Children know their history and feel confident in their culture**
- **Children are healthy**
- **Children are happy**

These reflect the desire of families for their children to be happy, healthy and knowledgeable in their First Culture and language, and in Western and global knowledge.

Children's development in their early years of life directly impacts their lifelong social, education, health and economic wellbeing. Studies have shown that adverse childhood experiences are linked with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, substance misuse, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.<sup>81 82 83 84 85 86 87</sup> Further, child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing are impacted by racism and threats to their culture and identity.<sup>88 89</sup>

First Nations children in Australia fare worse in health, education and safety than other Australian children. The 2020 Closing the Gap data demonstrates First Nations children still trail far behind non-Indigenous children in literacy, numeracy and writing skills<sup>90</sup>. The report showed that reducing the gap in child mortality is not on track, and that the target of four year-olds enrolled in early childhood education is on track for all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory, where the gap is the largest. Children have poorer outcomes the more remote they live.

At Children's Ground, many children are exposed to or have experienced adverse life experiences and stress in their early years due to intergenerational socio-economic injustice. Experiences include economic poverty, family violence, abuse and racism.

'Start Early' is a key principle of Children's Ground. The focus is to mitigate and prevent adverse childhood experiences while creating opportunity from pre-birth through into adolescence and early adulthood. As consistent with Western evidence, the long-term outcomes for children intend to secure the necessary early foundations for health, mental health and life wellbeing. The CG Approach responds to structural racism by focusing on cultural, linguistic and geographically responsive service access and design from early childhood.



81 Silburn SR, Nutton G, Arney F, Moss B.. 2011. The First 5 Years: Starting Early. Topical paper commissioned for the public consultations on the Northern Territory Early Childhood Plan. Darwin: Northern Territory Government

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90 Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2018. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2020



## Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers

### Key findings:

- 223 children 0-5 years engaged in early learning – who have never or rarely engaged previously
- 82% of children aged 0-5 across the four communities have engaged in early years learning
- 100% of children engaged in early learning alongside their family

Children's Ground's Learning & Wellbeing framework covers development, wellbeing and learning from birth to adulthood. It is an intergenerational model that focuses on children, their family and the communities in which they live. It covers a child's social, cultural, cognitive, creative, physical and emotional development.

As part of Children's Ground's commitment to a contemporary, global and culturally responsive learning system, Learning & Wellbeing delivery includes two key knowledge systems:

- First Cultural learning skills and knowledge which include age-appropriate knowledge and skills in land/country, language, kinship and other cultural knowledge and practices.
- English/Western learning skills and knowledge which includes age-appropriate knowledge and skills aligning with the national Early Years Learning Framework and schooling curriculum including proficiency in English literacy and numeracy, economy, and global skills.

***“When taught first in their own languages, children learn better, are more self-confident and transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to additional languages... Children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are much more likely to experience frustration and failure, resulting in higher dropout rates for these children”<sup>91</sup>.***

The goal is for children to enter adulthood as First Nations children, strong in their identity and wellbeing with full life choices and opportunities.

In the full CG Approach, Learning & Wellbeing delivery includes:

- Local First Nations and national Western learning play-based pedagogy and curriculum for key developmental age groups: 0-3 years; 4-5 years; 6-8 years; 9-12 years (and beyond for secondary school curriculum and employment/further study transition opportunities)
- Local First Nations and Western-trained educators
- Intergenerational engagement in learning (alongside family)
- Individual child Learning & Wellbeing plans developed with families
- Integrated wrap around support for children and families engaged in early years learning
- Learning on country, in centre and home environments
- Health promotion, education and literacy integrated into all early learning sessions, with significant focus on social and emotional wellbeing promotion and literacy



Children's Ground delivers three levels of Learning & Wellbeing:

- **Formal learning:** consists of engagement in a structured learning environment of early years and primary learning.
- **Extended hours learning:** includes after school learning and school holiday programs. This extends the hours in which learning can occur (e.g. cultural learning, homework support and tutoring) and provides children with extracurricular opportunities that promote skills development and learning in other domains (e.g. sport, arts, music).
- **Informal learning:** includes activities that provide an environment for social and cultural development and wellbeing through community events including camps and intergenerational gatherings.

Together, all three levels provide different entry points for engagement into formal learning and build a culture of learning that are valued and present across the community. In turn, this aims to build on the social and cultural economy of the community through their focus on learning and wellbeing for their children.

Due to only implementing a growth model in Central Australia, learning and wellbeing included a phased increase in early years sessions across the period and did not include routine extended hours learning activities, although some activities did occur.

This section presents evaluation findings and evidence around the extent to which Children's Ground achieved increased access to and engagement in formal early learning. Data is presented across two age groups: 0-5 years and 6-8 years. Consistent delivery of extended hours and informal learning was not possible within the growth model. Engagement in informal learning environments is presented later in section *‘Change and impact for families’*.

<sup>91</sup> UNESCO. 2012. Why language matters for the Millennium Development Goals. UNESCO Office Bangkok and Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific. ISBN: 978-92-9223-387-7

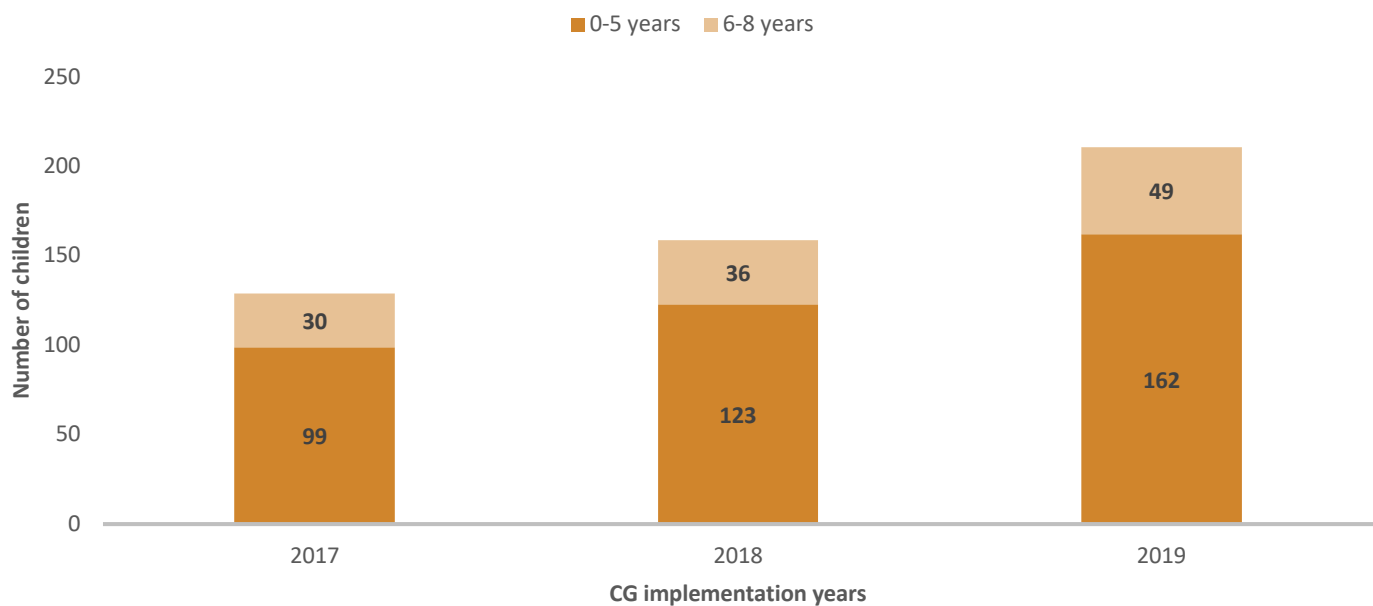
## Formal early learning and wellbeing

### Progress measures:

- Children have increased access to high quality early years learning
- Number of children accessing high quality early years learning

Graph 4 shows the number of unique children aged 0-8 years<sup>92</sup> engaged in Learning & Wellbeing with Children's Ground over the first three years of delivery. First Nations teaching and learning practices require children to engage in learning alongside their family. Children's Ground always engages children alongside their family, including parents, grandparents, siblings, aunties and other family members.

**Graph 4: Number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in Learning & Wellbeing with Children's Ground from 2017-19, by year**



Children's Ground created access to regular and responsive early years learning in four communities. Over three years, increased numbers of children engaged in early years learning, parallel to increased early learning personnel and resources and increased learning offerings.

While engagement grew over time, there were external factors influencing children's engagement in early learning:

- Delivery not being entirely place-based over the period
- Limited transport resources meant engagement of children in learning on country sessions was limited by seats available. Demand was regularly higher than existing resources could support
- Disruptions due to family and community stress and mobility. Each community experienced disruptions to delivery over the period due to grief/loss, family mobility and periods of family conflict – all of which are constantly present in people's lives



<sup>92</sup> For Children's Ground and Western evidence bases, 'early childhood' spans the first eight years of a child's development, learning and wellbeing. Recognising that Children's Ground does not currently deliver a formal mainstream primary school learning curriculum, children aged 6-8 years are not encouraged to attend Children's Ground's early learning and where possible are supported to engage with mainstream primary schools. However, at times older children do attend with their family due to a range of reasons. In 2018 through school partnerships, some primary aged children were supported by their schools to engage in learning on country sessions with Children's Ground with families. Children's Ground has not had the resources to formalise these arrangements permanently.



### Progress measures:

- A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early years learning

Baseline data from 147 children 0-5 years attending Children's Ground indicated that only 14% of children had accessed early years learning prior to engaging with Children's Ground. Of this, First Nations families and staff reported that attendance was irregular.

Despite limited resources, Children's Ground achieved critical mass in engagement of children aged 0-8 years in early years learning. Population data indicates that 89% of children aged 0-8 across the four communities engaged in early years learning. This exceeds expectations and demonstrates both the need and the appetite of families for early years learning services. Engaging a critical mass of children in Early Years learning opportunities is central to whole of community generational change.



### Progress measures:

- Number of children (3-5 years) engaging in early years learning (progressing towards Universal Access levels)

Children's Ground's design is to offer a full-time offering of formal early learning in each community (25-30 hrs) to increase engagement opportunities of children and families. This can occur in partnership with local services that operate in line with key practice principles.

Children's Ground's experience in both Kakadu West Arnhem and Central Australia shows that service offerings must be available daily to be able to engage kids in early learning at Universal Access levels. An extended service offering provides equity in access by enabling increased opportunities for families to engage when they can.

Funding did not provide capacity to deliver the hours to achieve Universal Access<sup>93</sup>. Delivery days and hours increased in each community over the first three years, towards Universal Access levels. On average, two sessions were delivered each week in three communities, ranging from 7-10 hours weekly in each. The fourth community, in its early stages of engagement and delivery, averaged weekly engagement of 5 hours per week.

While Universal Access is yet to be achieved, regular weekly delivery in each community has established early years learning as a norm and part of family and community life.



<sup>93</sup> Universal Access: Children participating in a high-quality early childhood education program for 15 hours per week or 600 hours per year in the year before full-time school.

## Children's progress with cultural and Western learning and wellbeing

The Akaltje<sup>94</sup> Learning and Wellbeing progress and outcomes framework was developed from the Arrernte learning curriculum framework by Arrernte Elders and educationalists. It also drew from the National Early Years Learning Framework and international frameworks.

As an early baseline, after three years of the CG Approach, Figure 13 provides learning and developmental progress against outcomes and a selection of indicators - for children 0-8 years as assessed by Arrernte and Western educators.

See Appendix 8 for more information on the child Learning & Wellbeing outcomes and for the observation scale used by cultural and Western-trained educators<sup>95</sup>.

**Figure 13: Child learning and wellbeing progress summaries**



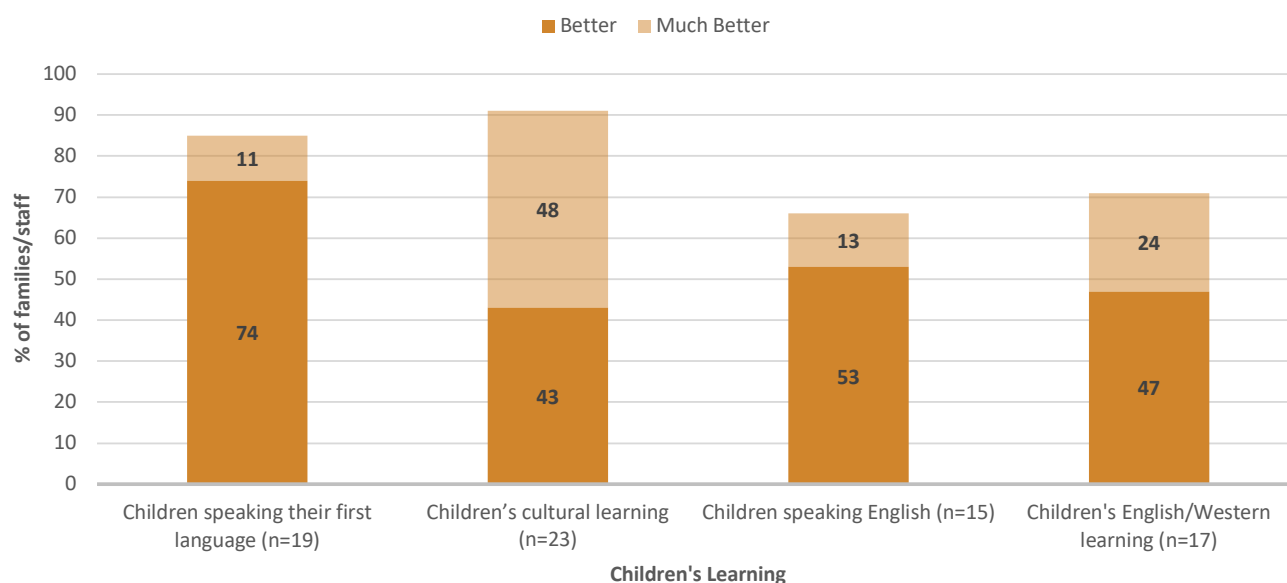
<sup>94</sup> Akaltje means knowing a person, thing or fact - learning and knowing everything.

<sup>95</sup> Data has been combined for 'All of the time' and 'Most of the time' and for 'Not very often' and 'Not at all'.



First Nations staff/families were asked to ‘think about how children’s learning is going now, compared to before Children’s Ground started’. Graph 5 shows their responses.

**Graph 5: First Nations family/staff perspectives on children’s learning**



*“Children’s Ground is always there... we’ve got the little ones coming over all the time. When we have learning here it’s a bit different than the other organisations. Because others – like pre-schools, like childcare. Here the mothers and grandmothers are here. When we bring the kids to Children’s Ground, the little small ones, we always talk in Arrernte to them, and the white people [non-First Nations staff], they always talk English to them. It’s much better if the little ones come here. They learn more and we talk in Arrernte to them and when they go home, they’ll know then. Because I know some of the little kids still speak English all the time, when they go back from that child care... we teach them Arrernte and we always tell the parents, ‘Talk to these little kids in Arrernte’ and like, the Larapinta mob, they talk in Luritja or Western.”*

Family/Staff member, 2019

The quotes below are representative of the strongest themes from family/staff collective responses.

*“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.”*

*“Kids are learning counting, cutting, shapes, sizes, gluing – it’s a lot better now.”*

*“Language won’t be learned on a blackboard – we teach them how they need to learn.”*

*“Kids are putting words together – used to be all in English. Now they learn with English and Arrernte.”*

*“[My daughter] learned really quick – she used to talk in English and whisper in Arrernte – now she talks proud in both.”*

*“The little ones know their country. Mums know their skin names now – they know how to address everyone in the family. Kids and adults are learning this every day at Children’s Ground and at home now.”*

Family/Staff members, 2019



When asked how Children's Ground is going with supporting children's learning, 30% (n=27) of First Nations family/staff members referred to children struggling in mainstream schooling. These are individual quotes, not representative of strong evaluation themes.

*"We've been struggling for a long time with our children. Like our children being in schools. When our children started they had all these little learning areas in schools. But I think our children weren't learning enough because they was always put in this room where there was only black children there. Nobody really cared about how they learn and where they're up to."*

*"I started at Children's Ground because my children weren't getting enough cultural education and people wasn't listening. Like 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."*

*"Before Children's Ground started, we went to learning with [another local service], but there was not much Arrernte mob and I wasn't comfortable."*

*"I took my little niece [to school] and she got scared because there's all these different little faces and teachers. And she wasn't used to being indoors. A big step from outdoor to indoor, you know."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

## Summary

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 previously 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. Increasing engagement related to increased delivery and an additional community and creating certainty, trust and relationships with children and families. 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 – with previous programs being short lived and repeatedly funded and de-funded. 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.

The process findings presented in the previous section demonstrate that the enabling conditions for engaging a new cohort of children included the key operational principles of being family and community led, strengths based, place based and with a dedicated focus on starting early. This dedicated focus on children is held by all Children's Ground staff and families. Local governance and design ensured first language and culture were embedded in early learning. Developing policies and processes with families and engaging local people as educators led to family engagement alongside their children. The ownership of services at a community level and the combination of both First Cultural and Western learning drove child engagement and learning outcomes.



## Children know their history and feel confident in their culture

### Key findings:

- 100% of children engaged in cultural learning alongside and led by their family
- 85% of children progressed in speaking their first language
- 91% of children progressed in their cultural learning



In Australia, there are no legislative or policy frameworks that reflect First Nations rights to *“establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”*<sup>96</sup>.

A bilingual movement previously existed within some mainstream educational institutions and frameworks. *“In 1972, the Australian Labor Government at the time launched the Northern Territory Bilingual Education program. At its most ambitious in 1988, 24 remote schools had programs in English and 19 Aboriginal languages. Local people were directly involved in the education of their children, and champions for schooling in remote communities”*<sup>97</sup>.

More than 30 years on, only a few bilingual education programs remain in Northern Territory schools.

For many First Nations language and family groups across Australia, colonisation has disrupted the continuation of cultural learning and the generational transmission of language and important cultural practices, protocols and knowledge systems.

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).

*“There’s not many old people anymore – only some. They are carrying on the culture, language and land and their people and family. We need to learn from them.”*

First Nations young leader, 2019

Children’s Ground First Nations leaders in both Kakadu West Arnhem and Central Australia highlighted that intergenerational teaching and learning, particularly children learning from their grandparents, is central to First Nations learning systems. This learning system is guided by First Nations kinship, laws connected to country and the processes of cultural transmission. Community leaders also talked of the centrality of learning occurring on country:

*“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.”*

*“We belong to Arrernte, Arrernte country. All of my grandchildren, they were born here. We’ve got to teach them in Arrernte so that they might be part of this, when we’re passed away.”*

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

Invasion and colonisation disrupted and dislocated most First Nations people from their traditional lands, interrupting the foundations of systems of law, society, knowledge, education and health systems. Many families continue to experience barriers to spending time on their country. This was evident in Kakadu West Arnhem and also in Central Australia, where most people are not living on their country and instead are living in towns or communities away from their traditional lands.

Children’s Ground’s Learning and Wellbeing framework requires children to learn on country - led by First Nations educators on a weekly basis.

<sup>96</sup> United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 14. 2007

<sup>97</sup> The Conversation. Why more schools need to teach bilingual education to Indigenous children. June 16, 2017

**Progress measures:**

- Children have increased access to First Cultural early years learning
- Number of children engaged in First Cultural early years learning

From 2017-19:

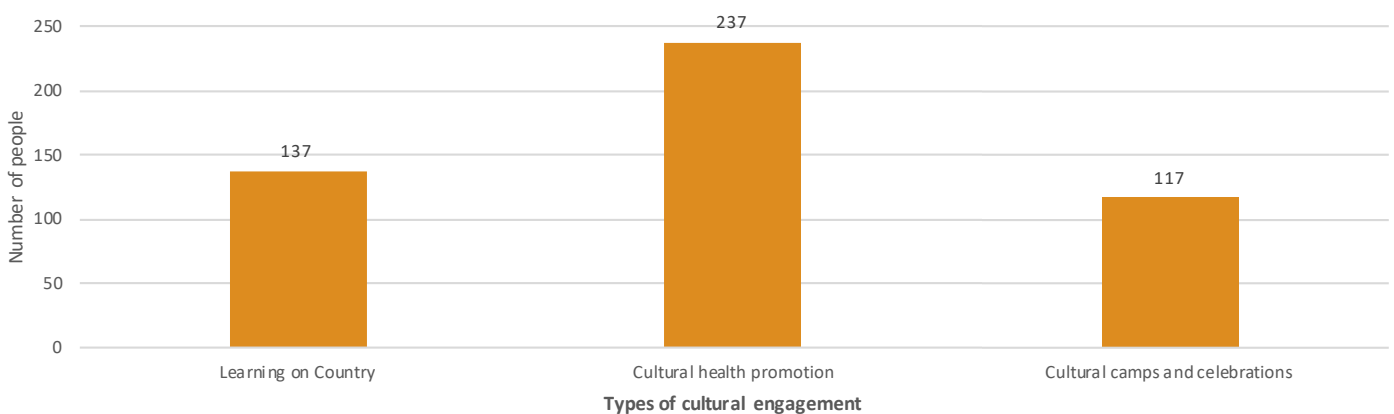
- All (100%) children who participated in early learning with Children's Ground engaged in cultural learning in their first language and about their culture and traditional lands alongside and led by their family
- Learning on Country was delivered on 337 occasions
- Cultural health promotion was delivered through early learning sessions on 220 occasions (including bush food and medicine collection/preparation, conversations about uses and benefits and learning about traditional cultural practices)
- Two cultural learning and healing camps were held
- Four large cultural and community celebrations were held

*"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."*

**Family/Staff member, 2019**

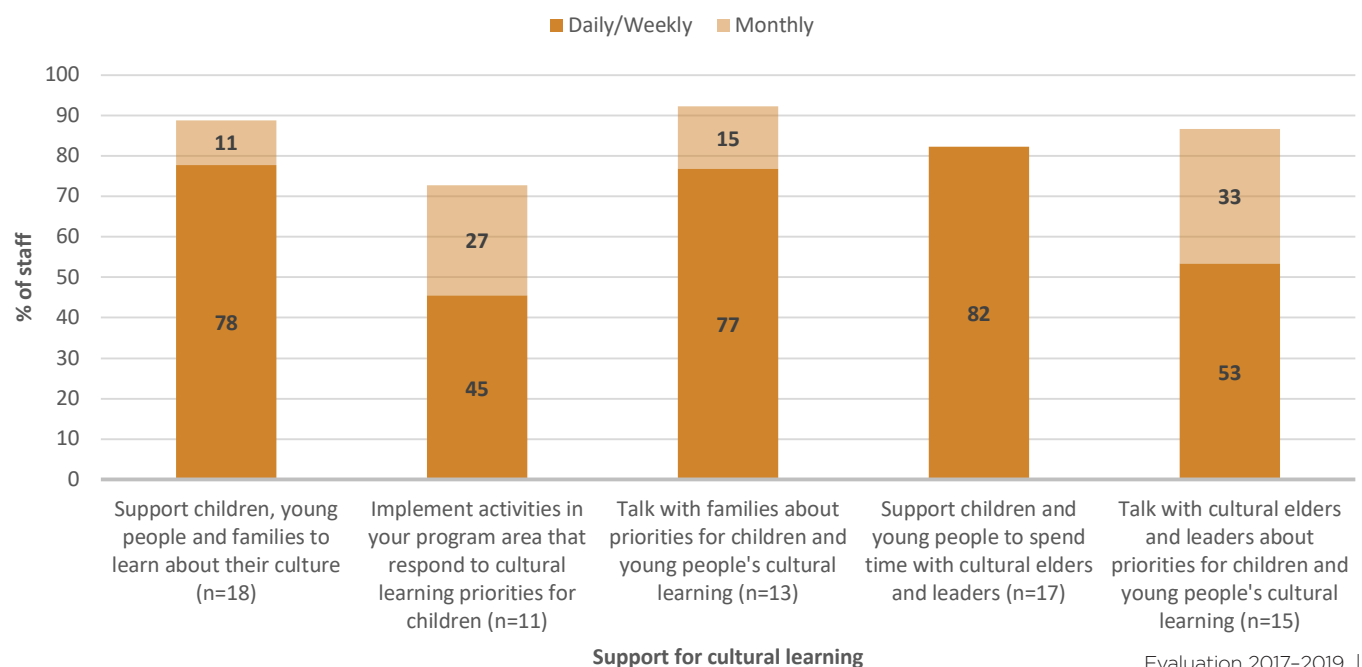
Graph 6 shows the number of children 0-8 years who engaged in cultural learning with Children's Ground.

**Graph 6: Number of children 0-8 years who engaged in cultural learning with Children's Ground**



Western and First Nations staff were asked (via the anonymous online survey) 'how often they support children's cultural learning and wellbeing'. Their responses are presented in Graph 7.

**Graph 7: Frequency of staff support for children's cultural learning and wellbeing**







References to the importance of children's first language and cultural learning were overwhelming throughout all evaluation interviews. As presented earlier, 84% and 91% of family/staff members reported that children's first language and cultural learning have improved since Children's Ground started. The quotes below are representative of key themes from the many responses from First Nations families and staff.

*"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."*

*"I see family teaching the little ones in our way and they don't get that at school."*

*"[My daughter] is learning culture – the older ladies teaching this out bush. Then she'll grow up a strong Aboriginal lady. This wasn't happening before now."*

*"They're going well. They're learning about how to pronounce things, because in the other schools, they're not really learning Arrernte, their language. There's little bits of words that are being used not in the proper way. My little children, they correct another little people who talk the wrong way – 'You can't talk like that. You got to talk this way' [relates to first language]. Even around town. I even tell all the young people too, 'You don't talk like that. That's not Arrernte. You talk this way, proper way Arrernte. Make it strong for your next generation.'"*

*"Before Children's Ground teaching our little ones was really hard. No support to go on country and many haven't been on homelands for a long time."*

*"I see it in them [cultural learning]. They're trying really hard, you know, and – I don't see so much worries in them. But they're doing better. They learn really fast from the Elders."*

*"Teaching the little ones about dancing and how to get prepared and all that has been hard... because most of our Elders are all gone and we've only got a few left. So that's been a real struggle."*

*"They really want to learn and they are now contributing to learning more, and there is more who want to come and learn language and culture and Children's Ground – those who missed out. No other place in Alice for Arrernte people to do that."*

*"Culture makes kids who they really are. It's hard for them to do mainstream and learn culture late – it is hard to learn culture at an older age."*

*"We are talking Arrernte all the time to the kids. Some adults in learning are learning language alongside the kids."*

**Family/Staff members, 2019**

While cultural learning focuses on children 0-8 years, First Nations family/staff members reported that young people and adults are increasing their cultural knowledge by learning alongside their children, through their engagement with early learning at Children's Ground. This is reported on in section 'Change and impact for community – Next generation leadership'.

## Summary

As reported by First Nations families and staff, children have access to and are engaging in learning on their traditional lands regularly for the first time. They are learning from their important cultural teachers and Elders and alongside their families in an intergenerational environment - which is how First Nations learning occurs. This learning approach underpins knowledge, skills and cultural transmission.

The key systemic enablers of the progress towards children knowing their history and culture have been local First Nations governance, employment of community members and privileging First Nations language and culture in curriculum design, planning and delivery. The process enablers of cultural learning engagement have stemmed from Children's Ground's achievements in providing the space and time for First Nations people to lead and govern according to both Western and cultural practices.

Through the evaluation, families reported valuing the opportunity to take their children to spend time on and learn about and through their traditional lands. Some adults have not been on their country for years and families reported that some children had never spent time on their country before Children's Ground. At Children's Ground, the critical elements of cultural learning are 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.

## Children are healthy and happy

### 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

Australia has a world class health system. Despite this, First Nations people currently experience alarming health and wellbeing and consistently have the poorest health outcomes and a burden of disease irreconcilable with the standards of health and wellbeing experienced by most Australians<sup>98</sup>.

The National Framework for Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families (2016) notes that “the child and family health service system does not currently meet the needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families”<sup>99</sup>.

Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing platform and framework is titled '*Health in the Hands of the People*'. It recognises that children's lifelong learning, wellbeing and opportunities are impacted not only by their own health, but also the health and wellbeing of their family.

The framework focuses on delivering health promotion where people live, taking it outside of clinics and into community. Child and family health promotion and prevention includes:

- Maternal and child health, learning, wellbeing and development, including nutrition, skin, ear, dental and other health promotion and check-ins
- Family health and wellbeing promotion, including planning and support with individuals, family groups and communities
- Social and emotional wellbeing, with a focus on dealing with trauma through cultural practices, emotional literacy, promotion, prevention, and support
- Environmental health and wellbeing, at a family, household and community level
- Supported access to and delivery of First Nations health and wellbeing knowledge and practices (traditional healing)
- Supported access to clinical health and wellbeing

Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing framework aims to increase access to high quality, comprehensive and culturally safe primary health care, with support where required for individuals in their management of chronic and acute health conditions.



In the full CG Approach, Family Health & Wellbeing is implemented in the following ways:

- Daily integration of maternal and child health promotion into all early learning sessions
- Targeted maternal and child health promotion
- Daily integration of social and emotional wellbeing into all early learning sessions
- Targeted social and emotional wellbeing
- Building strong and supportive relationships with families
- Working with the whole family with family health plans (health impacts all members of a household and the wellbeing of children)
- Targeted public health and health promotion initiatives
- Comprehensive child nutrition program
- Daily integration of cultural health promotion into all early learning sessions
- Targeted cultural health promotion
- Supporting children and families to have agency in their health and wellbeing
- Sitting with people where they are most comfortable (home and community settings), listening and providing information in first language
- Embedding health promotion, prevention, responses and support in the context of First Nations cultural practices that promotes a family and cultural approach to health delivery
- Working with people to identify what support they need and facilitate supported referrals to services, both within Children's Ground and outside

*Health in the Hands of the People* aligns directly with the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme which aims to contribute to closing the gap in life expectancy within a generation and to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade.

98 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. 2017. Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, AHMAC, Canberra

99 Department of Health. 2016. National Framework for the Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families, Australian Government, Canberra





### Progress measures:

- Children have increased access to health promotion
- Children have increased access to social and emotional wellbeing and literacy
- Number of children engaged in health promotion and support
- Number of children engaged in social and emotional wellbeing

### Child development, health and wellbeing promotion

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. 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 with nutrition deliberately embedded in all early learning from the beginning.

In early learning delivery, health promotion is integrated in all early learning sessions through a range of cultural and Western activities and conversations (health education). This is delivered by the Family Health & Wellbeing team and is also considered the responsibility of learning staff to deliver and integrate. This was particularly important in 2017 and 2018 prior to the establishment of the specialist health promotion team.

Targeted health promotion and education is delivered by the Children's Ground Family Health and Wellbeing specialists (Health Promotion, Maternal and Child Health, Counseling, Nutrition) and through partnerships with local health services. Key priorities include: nutrition, maternal and infant health, social/emotional wellbeing, physical health, dental health and ear health.

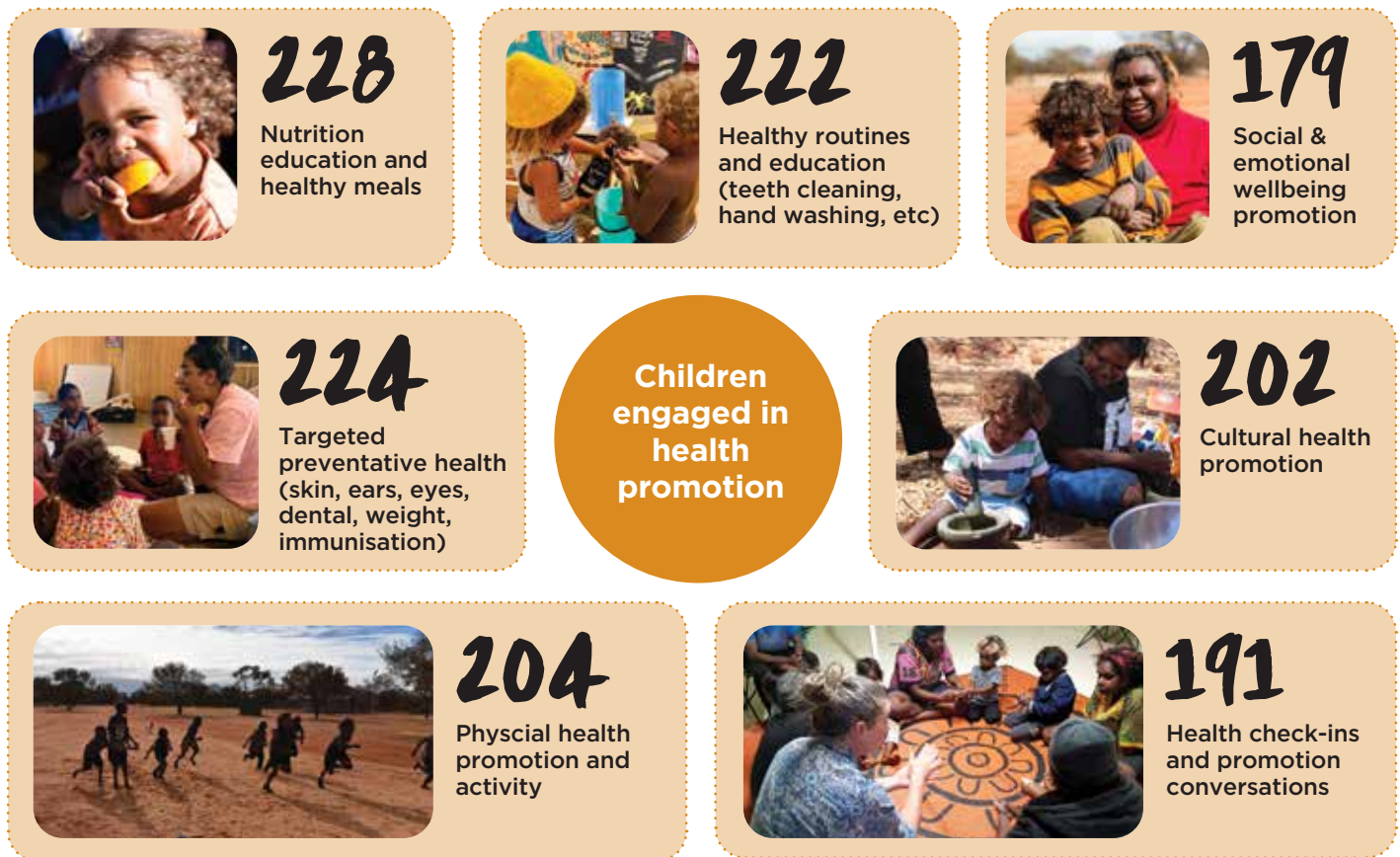
Targeted health promotion occurred within an individual and family context outside of learning session.

Apart from nutrition, health promotion data collection began in late 2018, following dedicated funding.

From July 2018 and in 2019, 256 children aged 0-8 years engaged in universal and/or targeted health and wellbeing promotion.

First Nations children and families often live with multiple health risks. Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing platform is person centred rather than disease centred. It seeks to deliver a holistic approach that enables people to engage in wide ranging types of health promotion, support and planning across multiple facets of their overall health and wellbeing. The figure below shows the number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in health promotion.

**Figure 14: Number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in health promotion, by type, from July 2018 to December 2019**



### Maternal and child health

From July 2018 and in 2019, Children's Ground's Family Health team engaged with 61 babies (0-1 year) and 66 young children (2-3 years) and their families in health promotion and wellbeing support.

When babies were born in families already engaged with Children's Ground, maternal and child health support was provided early and on an ongoing basis. When staff heard about babies being born into families not actively engaged with Children's Ground, they worked with the extended family members to engage the mothers and family and provided support if requested.

Child health literacy and routine health behaviours were embedded in the learning environment for every child, engaging children from 0-5 years and their parents. Individualised approaches for children and their families targeted specific needs and included supported referrals and collaborations with local health services. Bridging children and their families into the mainstream health service system is part of early intervention and equitable access. Key health referrals were in relation to hearing loss, dental care, immunisation, clinical health key age and stage check-ups and acute illness.

### Cultural Health Practice

Children regularly participated in cultural health knowledge and practice. Cultural health encompasses holistic health protocols and practices from birth. Children's health was supported through a dedicated focus in learning on country sessions with teaching and skills in traditional medicines, bush foods and wellbeing practices. This included identifying, collecting and preparing/applying bush foods and bush medicines. Important cultural health practices including smoking ceremonies, protocols and safety for being on country and on other people's country and cultural practices around sorry business.

Community Elders, Angangkeroes (traditional healers) and adults identified and led key learning, skills and practice. Children's Ground partnered with Akeyulere (Cultural Health organisation) to support access for community members to Angangkeroes and bush medicines.





## Nutrition

Daily nutrition is universally integrated into all early learning sessions as it is critical to the development, learning and wellbeing of children. A nutritionist and local First Nations nutrition staff work together to ensure menus align with nutritional standards. Meals and snacks are provided in all learning sessions and are accompanied by health promotion conversations/education with children and families. Nutrition is role modelled across the CG Approach through organisational 'Healthy Food' policies.

Health behaviour and nutrition skills and knowledge of children and parents are prioritised as foundational to wellbeing. All (100%) children and families engaged in early learning also accessed nutritious food and 199 children aged 0-8 years and their families engaged in conversations/education about nutrition. Staff and families reported change in health and nutritional practices and behaviour in children (see comments below).

Food insecurity has a significant impact on the nutrition, health, learning and wellbeing of children and their families. Food security was targeted as part of health promotion with families. From July 2018 and in 2019, 64 people engaged in health promotion or support in relation to food security.

## Social and emotional wellbeing

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). Trauma informed and responsive practice is central to Children's Ground's operations. The history and impact of colonisation has manifested in complex intergenerational trauma and ongoing stress for children and families. This impacts the development, learning and wellbeing of children.

The approach to social and emotional wellbeing includes both First Nations and Western practices. The full family health platform was not in place until late 2018. From 2017, Children's Ground embedded SEWB promotion into early learning environments. This approach focused on both the children and the adults participating as family members and/or staff. The early childhood educators trained in trauma-informed practice worked with cultural educators so that centre-based learning delivery and spaces were informed by both culturally responsive and trauma-based pedagogy. The varying SEWB needs of children and their family members were supported through early years learning practice as well as cultural wellbeing. The spirit of the child is central to their wellbeing. Simply being on country and connecting with traditional lands is central to First Nations health practice and promoting social/emotional wellbeing for First Nations children and people of all ages.

*"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**



Through experiences both intergenerationally and as part of daily life, the majority of children interacting with Children's Ground experience or have experienced trauma. This manifests in many ways. Western educators with experience in play and sensory therapy created play-based, trauma-informed learning environments for social and emotional wellbeing promotion.

*"When we consider there are kids accessing the program who have undiagnosed trauma-related issues, FASD [Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder]... as well as sensory processing problems... 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**

With new funding, a specialist counsellor with early years experience was employed to work in early learning and part time in general counselling in 2019. This meant dedicated SEWB promotion and support was available to First Nations staff and families. The integration of SEWB within early learning sessions proved to be a 'soft-entry' point for families who then engaged in more targeted individual or family SEWB counselling and support. SEWB health promotion was also supported by other staff with experience working with crisis and trauma. Targeted support during the period responded to grief and loss, family violence, community violence, depression, anxiety and stress.

Children's Ground has identified the serious need for more dedicated SEWB practitioner roles due to the enormous levels of need within the community. The burden of mental health stress and life crisis is so high that it is a daily occurrence and is part of everyday work for all staff. Some occasions of support were not formally recorded in data.

First Nations families/staff were asked to 'think about children's health now and how it compared to before Children's Ground started'.

- 89% of families/staff (n=18) reported that children's physical health (their body and nutrition) was better (50%) or much better (39%)
- 89% of families/staff (n=19) reported that children's emotional health (their mind and behaviour) was better (37%) or much better (53%)

First Nations family/staff members were asked if they had seen any changes in children's physical or emotional health. The quotes below are representative of the strongest evaluation themes.

*"I know a lot of little children that come here to school, so they have their routines, like cleaning their teeth, blowing their nose, cleaning out their ears. Having got clothes and having healthy food. I think little children have changed. They seem more healthier than when they first started. I've noticed changes in all the little ones."*

*"Seeing a lot of changes in them little ones... They are starting to do the right things, like blowing their nose, going up and washing the hands... and eating all their healthy food up... They're helping to clean the dishes. Helping to pack up... some little kids, they used to come dirty, sleepy, hungry. But now they're coming - like they are thinking we should be at Children's Ground... and learning to socialise and being - being good little people to each other, not being bossy or anything like that. They just come now and they know what to do."*

*"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."*

*"Children's Ground has changed how they act. At home they are mad, crazy you know. But at Children's Ground they are good - such different kids. Anna [Educator] talks to them about not being silly and we practice this at home."*

*"Their health... It's better. It's much better, like you know, when kids come to Children's Ground, the ladies in the kitchen make sure they've got healthy foods for them all the time."*

*"We work hard every day - the nutrition is very good, kids are learning about food that they would never have had before - like the hummus and the carrots. They love that now."*

*"She mostly eats healthy now. Wants to brush her teeth and wash hands."*

*"Kids used to drink cool drinks [soft drinks] - now lots come asking for water."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

## Summary

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. For children with targeted health needs, families 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 cultural health practice.

Child health promotion was enabled by the integrated service platform and the principle of 'deliver the whole, not the bits', with a close working relationship between Family Health and Learning teams. Delivery in early learning sessions has been a soft-entry pathway for health promotion engagement and has led to engagement in targeted health promotion and support.

The improved physical and emotional wellbeing reported for some children, is the beginning of a long-term approach to health literacy and behaviour starting in children's earliest years. The expectation is that this will result in improved health outcomes over the life course.





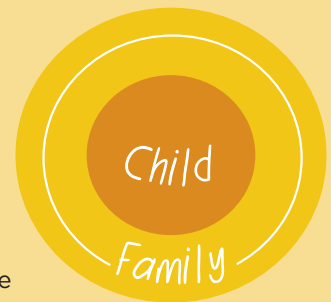
# Change and impact for families

The most significant influence on a child is their family. Children aged 0-8 years of age form their sense of identity, place and belonging in the context of their family.

The evaluation framework identified two key outcome areas for children's families.

- **Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development**
- **Families are socially and economically strong**

Short-term impact for families was expected over the first years of implementation, however, significant change and impact for these long-term family outcomes cannot be expected or evidenced within the first 10-15 years. Change is expected in family outcomes when the generation of children born during Children's Ground's operations grow up and start raising their own families.



*"What's changed is me, the way I've been seeing. I want to see our kids be stronger. Growing up strong, being leaders... I see the big picture for our kids being together, having our language and culture strong for these kids."*

Family/Staff member, 2019

Western research has long recognised that families have the greatest influence over a child's development and life wellbeing.<sup>100 101</sup> A child's family environment is a key determinant in social wellbeing, physical health, mental health, educational and economic outcomes.

Children living in families and environments with economic stress, neglect and violence fare worse across a range of life indicators. This stress affects educational attainment, safety and access to basic services for children and families.<sup>102 103</sup> Children risk lifelong health and mental health challenges<sup>104 105</sup> including increased risk of lifelong physical and mental health problems, including major depression, heart disease and diabetes<sup>106</sup>.

Where Children's Ground operates, poverty and economic stress are experienced by most families. Little or no sustained work history, combined with systemic racism and other significant challenges, means families experience complex and intergenerational inequity and extreme disadvantage.

In Australia, the Closing the Gap agenda recognises the broad social determinants that need to be addressed to achieve equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan recognises social determinants as a core part of the response to improving Aboriginal health outcomes. Despite decades of government attention and policy development, there remains a significant gap in service and system responses to the social, cultural and economic determinants for lifelong wellbeing.

The CG Approach invests in prevention and the social, cultural and economic determinants that impact whole families and communities – because the strength of families will directly impact the wellbeing of children.

## **Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development**

### **Key findings:**

- **319 family members 18+ years have 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**

In First Nations communities, all generations are responsible for the health and wellbeing of children.

'Families walking alongside their children' is a headline outcome indicator of the CG Approach and evaluation framework. This indicator was determined by cultural governance in both Kakadu West Arnhem and Central Australia. This is considered a key driver of child learning

and wellbeing outcomes. It is consistent with Western evidence and First Nations early childhood teaching and learning pedagogy being intergenerational - always requiring children to learn from Elders, other important cultural teachers and family, and alongside other children older and younger.

100 Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. 2016. Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems

101 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015. Australia's welfare 2015. Australia's welfare series no. 12. Cat. no. AUS 189. Canberra: AIHW; The role of the family in child wellbeing

102 Baxter, J.; Gray M; Hand, K; Hayes, A. 2012. Parental joblessness, financial disadvantage and the wellbeing of parents and children, Australian Institute of Family Studies

103 Marmot, M.. 2017. The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World: the argument. International Journal of Epidemiology, 1312-1318

104 Tamayo T, Christian Anda RF, Felitti VJ, Bremner JD, Walker JD, Whitfield C, Perry BD, et al. 2006. The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood. A convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology. European Archives of Clinical Neuroscience. 256(3):174-86. 38

105 Dominick, C. 2018. Inter-Parental Relationship Quality and its Effects on Children A literature review to support analysis and policy, Ministry of Social Development; ISBN: Online 978-1-98-854117-4

106 Shonkoff, J.P.. 2016. Capitalizing on Advances in Science to Reduce the Health Consequences of Early Childhood Adversity. JAMA Pediatrics. Published online August 22, 2016

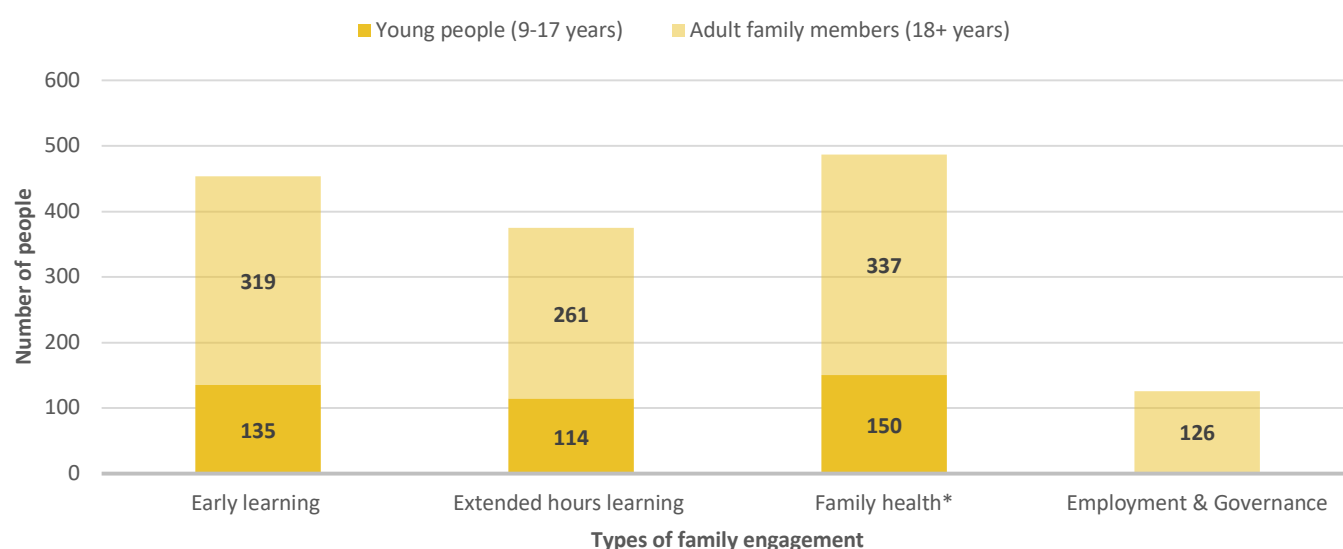
### Progress measures:

- Number of children have families participating alongside them in learning, health and development
- Number of family members involved in their community alongside their children

Children's Ground policies developed by First Nations governance groups state that all children who engage in early learning must be accompanied by an adult family member(s).

This section presents evaluation data in relation to the extent and ways in which families have walked alongside their children through their engagement and leadership of Children's Ground in Central Australia.

**Graph 8: Family engagement by age group and type**

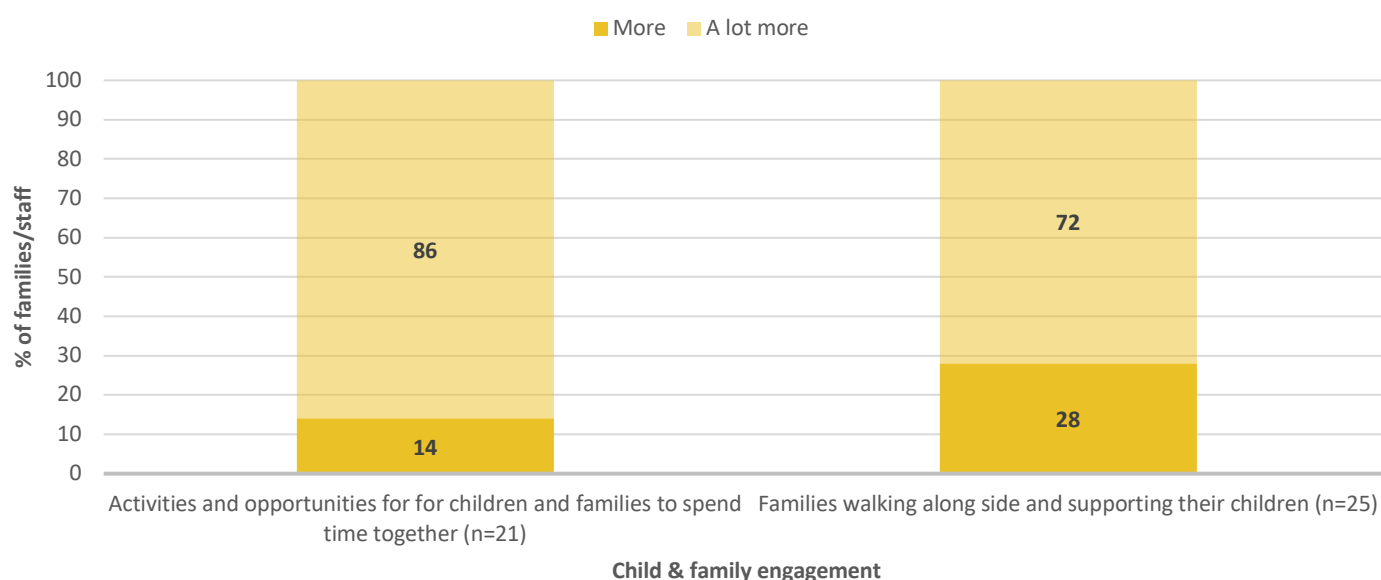


\* Family health data covers July 2018 to December 2019

Note: The number of young people (9-17 years) engaged in employment was less than five which Children's Ground does not present publicly. These have been combined with adult engagement in employment.

First Nations families/staff (n=21) were asked 'are there more or less activities for children and families to spend time together since Children's Ground started – or about the same?' and 'how are families going walking along side and supporting their children – now compared to before Children's Ground started?' Graph 9 shows that 100% of families/staff have seen increased child and family engagement.

**Graph 9: Family/Staff reported family engagement with their children**







When asked 'How?' are families walking alongside their children, the quotes below represent the strongest themes from responses by First Nations families/staff.

*"Children's Ground is different from other child care organisations or child care 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."*

*"We never used to get the kids and families all together just on our own – now we all get together and visit everyone's country. Kids knew a lot about culture, but they are learning much more now and regular."*

*"It's [Children's Ground] about parents coming with their little ones. You learn with them little ones."*

*"I feel strong. All good now. Everybody together and involved and we can connect with other family and make decisions together. This is how we all get in touch now – at Children's Ground."*

*"Families are really proud to be supporting and teaching kids. Family are learning at the same time."*

*"It's very important for the little ones to come along. The same with the parents as well, with the little ones. They can always get involved... Because they've got to be there with the little ones, all the time."*

*"More family spending time together. Everyone's learning together – from little to old."*

*"They are different at CG – they are happy. At home they go their own way – at CG we are all together."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

## Summary

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

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 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.



## Families are socially and economically strong

### Key findings:

- 59 local First Nations people were employed - 34% had never worked before and 84% were not working when they started working with Children's Ground
- 83% of families/staff reported employment as important role modelling for young children
- 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 emotional health and wellbeing
- 562 people engaged in family/community celebrations and events

This section presents data that relates to the social and economic strength of families, which includes employment, health service engagement and access and the early foundational work for increasing social capital over time. While the family outcomes are expected to be achieved when the generation of children growing up are living a life of opportunity and become families themselves – it is important to also monitor and evaluate how Children's Ground is contributing to the strength of families now as role models and key influencers of the next generation of adults and community and cultural leaders.



## Economic strength (engagement in employment and training)

### Progress measures:

- Families have increased economic opportunities and support
- Number of families engaged in economic opportunities and support

From 2017-19, a total of 59 First Nations people were employed with Children's Ground. Of the 50 First Nations employees who completed a 'Previous employment' survey<sup>107</sup>:

- 34% reported having never worked before
- 84% were not working when they started with Children's Ground. Of these, 44% had not worked in the past 12 months and 36% had not worked in the past two years
- 40% of First Nations staff were on unemployment benefits and 32% were on other benefits (aged, family, disability)
- 71% of people who reported not receiving unemployment benefits had either never worked or had not worked recently (Range: never worked through to not worked for 8 months to 20+ years)
- 20% of staff were not employed and not receiving any government benefits when they started working at Children's Ground

Note: It is reportedly common for people to not access Centrelink at all due to punitive reporting measures and exclusions. Some families may only have one person receiving Centrelink benefits. This is undermeasured and underreported in publicly available data nationally.

First Nations people work in a range of roles that are based on their interests and strengths – for many, their roles are based on their cultural knowledge and responsibilities.



From 2017 to 19, people were employed in the following roles:

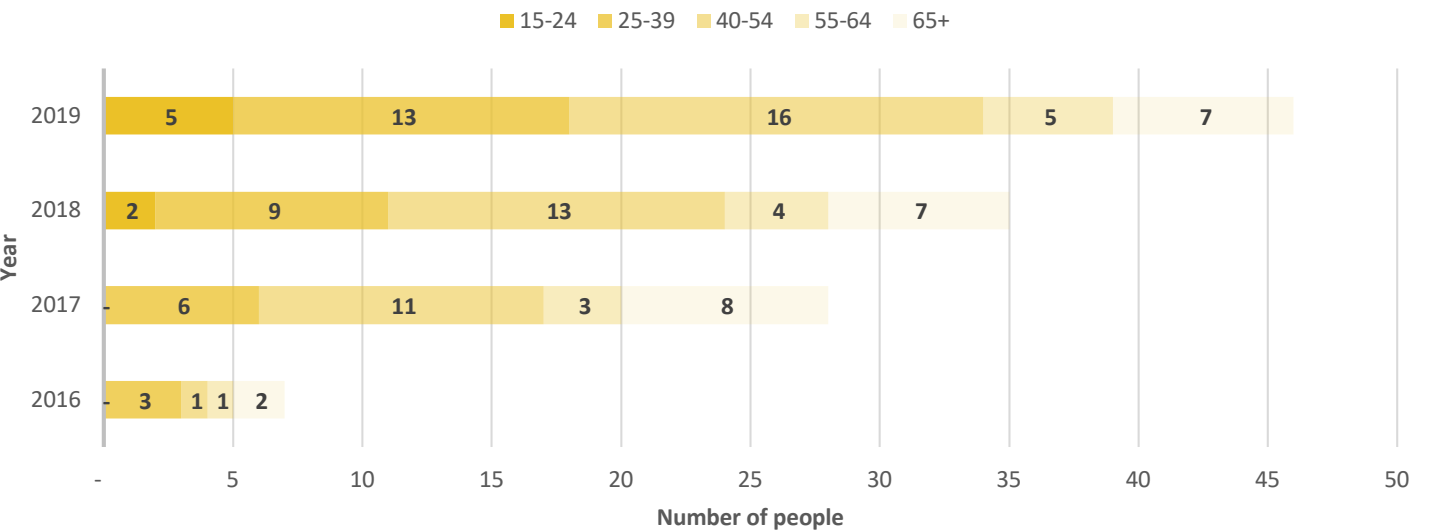
- Management: Co-Directors of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, Operations Coordinator
- Education: Cultural educators (male and female), Senior educators, Support staff
- Health: Health promotion (education), Nutrition (cooking and education), Maternal & child health, Traditional healers (Angangkere), Environmental health staff
- Cultural development: Cultural advisors, Dancers, Artists
- Enterprise: Authors, Artists
- Support staff: Administrative staff, Trainees, Drivers
- Community development: Walk Talk and Act community workers and leadership roles

<sup>107</sup> The Previous employment survey was introduced as part of all new starter paperwork in late 2018. Data for this report is drawn from a sample of 50 employees who completed the survey from 2018-2020.



The following graphs provide a snapshot of employment data by years, and then by quarters, contract type and hours worked. This begins with the Walk, Talk & Act phase and the move into the growth model operations from 2017 to 2019.

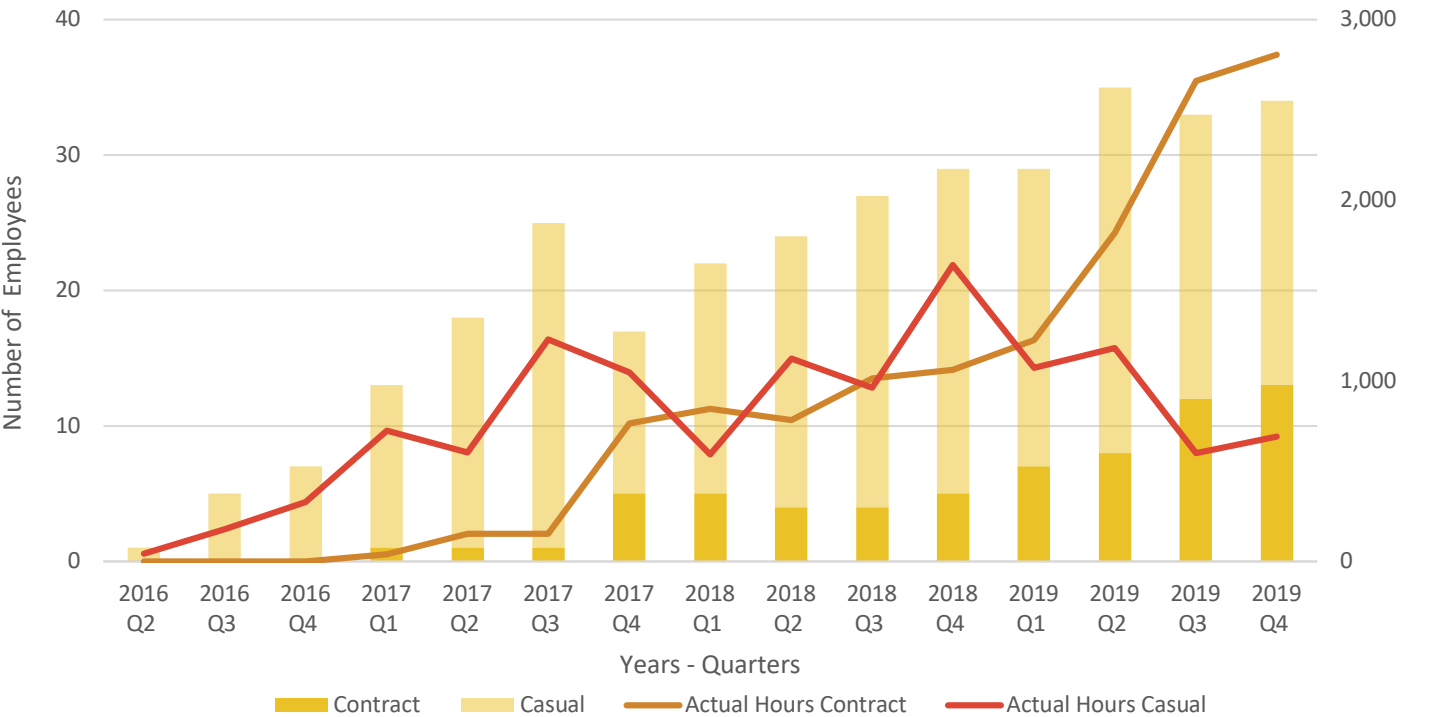
**Graph 10: Number of First Nations people employed with Children’s Ground, by age group and year**



Graph 10 shows an increase in First Nations employment in each delivery year, and in each age group each year, with the exclusion of elders who remained constant between 2018-19. The increase is likely due to the growth in resources to increase delivery and employ more people. Furthermore, in evaluation interviews, staff report a range of pathways to employment at Children’s Ground, including but not limited to: Engaging first in areas such as early learning with their children, health promotion or community governance - then becoming employed; Being referred to Children’s Ground for employment by family; Submitting an Expression of Interest; Volunteering to show their interest.

Graph 11 shows a steady increase in the number of hours worked by First Nations staff collectively and an increase in the number of people who have moved from casual to variable or fixed-term contracts. This shows increasing stability in employment for some staff, particularly those on variable or fixed-term contracts.

**Graph 11: Number of First Nations people employed with Children’s Ground, by quarter, year, contract type and hours worked**



As previously noted, the limited resources of the growth model have meant that widespread employment of First Nations people has not been possible to date. The flexible employment approach has been successful with the trajectory from casual to permanent increasing, as did work hours over time. For Central Australia, this is highlighted in Graph 14 with a drop in casual hours coinciding with the increase in contracted hours. This was the same pattern of employment that emerged in Kakadu West Arnhem.

Benefits of employment with Children's Ground have been reported for the individuals employed and their children and families.

First Nations families/staff were asked 'Is it important for Children's Ground to have First Nations staff?'. All (100% - n=23) responded 'yes'. When asked 'Why?' the key themes to emerge included (n=23 for all):

- 83% of families/staff referred to employment of young people and adults as role modelling for young children, with 26% referring to this as building a culture of employment within families
- 74% referred to First Nations employment meaning that children, families and staff are surrounded by First Nations people, language and culture – this was reported as positive for children's learning and wellbeing and as making people feel comfortable to work
- 65% referred to employment enabling Elders to teach; for children, young people and adults to learn from Elders before they pass; and to spend time on country learning from Elders
- 57% referred to employment as an enabler for children and families to spend time together and for children building relationships with other family members they don't know
- 52% referred to employment bringing families together and increasing respect for each other
- 35% referred to increased confidence of people through their employment



The quotes below represent key evaluation themes from family/staff responses.

*"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's giving them kids a good example about you can't be sitting over there and drinking and smoking dope and stuff like that. You've got to have somewhere you can have space and where you can do your job, work."*

*"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."*

*"We are teaching the little ones who they are – showing them their culture and history. We can do this because of Arrernte staff are there to tell them in every place – we have the staff for each place. We have Western teachers walking with us too."*

*"Going out on country with the kids, with the Elders. Take the kids out and the Elders before they pass on so they can know their country and all that learning."*



*"Because Western families have always had this... Lots of disrespect with what Western culture has done. There are generations of unemployed families in the community. When kids come here [Children's Ground], they see them working and they see the family working."*

*"Because we are teaching our little ones our way. We need families to be working here because different families have different roles for each child."*

*"So that they [children] can learn the other families as well. Because they're just growing, they don't know the other families - and we can say that's your nanna, that's your cousin, or uncle or auntie, or mum."*

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

Family/Staff members, 2019



## Employment support

From 2017-19 a total of 22 First Nations employees utilised Children's Ground's money management systems as a mechanism for savings, to receive a portion of their wage as a food voucher or to pay bills and purchase goods and services.

Over the three-year period, the use of Children's Ground's savings system, either regularly or on an as-needs basis, increased from 15 staff on 227 occasions in 2017 to 18 staff on 845 occasions in 2019. Of these, 14 staff used the savings system and 21 accessed food vouchers as a portion of their salary.

From July 2018 and in 2019, 56 people were supported with financial literacy and employment support (Ochre cards, birth certificates, tax file numbers, etc). Employment support occurred from the beginning of delivery however the data was not routinely collected until July 2018.

Some families/staff talked about their personal experiences with employment at Children's Ground. These included both positive experiences and challenges. These quotes are individual perspectives and not representative of evaluation themes.

*"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."*

*"...for me, my mum said 'get paid for the government to look after your kids', now I see it in another light. Now kids see and say when I grow up I am going to be learning."*

*"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."*

*"I work here because I wanted to teach the kids. Have always wanted to do this and have found it here. I'm very proud to work here."*

*"It's real good to come here, to Children's Ground. I know I feel a bit all right when I come here. I feel like the staff here is real good. They treat us like ourselves."*

*"A lot of people ask me to work here. I said we will be getting people to work but it will be slow because of funding."*

*"I think there's people out there that's got qualifications, but they don't work. So I think people need to go out there and find all these people that's got all these - because there are people out here that's looking for jobs."*

*"There wasn't enough Arrernte, First Nations people, working [in previous jobs]. There's just like foreigners from overseas working with our mob and they're not speaking language and stuff. Those are the things that are important you know. Yeah, so I didn't like how it was going, so I left a few of my jobs. Then I came to Children's Ground - we know everybody... it's like a family now. It's really good here."*

Family/Staff members, 2019







## Training and professional development

Children's Ground has provided opportunities for staff to engage in training and professional development. As described previously in section 'Economic strength', this focused on both Western and cultural training. Training included mandatory and compliance training (for the organisation and national legislation), OH&S, work roles and responsibilities, professional development and specialist areas, self-care and social and emotional wellbeing.

From 2018 to 2019<sup>108</sup>, 22 First Nations staff participated in 17 formal training and professional development opportunities. Staff also engaged in informal training that has not been thoroughly recorded to date.

The Economic Development & Wellbeing platform is designed to incorporate on-the-job training through peer learning and mentoring between First Nations and non-First Nations staff. In the anonymous online survey, staff members were asked about their engagement in providing and receiving mentoring and the regularity of this (regular is defined as daily or weekly): 93% of staff (n=14) who responded to the question reported engaging in providing and receiving peer mentoring and support.

First Nations families/staff commented that:

*"They [CG Western staff] respect us and the way we work in our cultural ways – we are teaching them too – telling them how it is – we don't put them aside – they have to know. We tell them and share our knowledge and culture so they know and we can do it together."*

*"We want to learn from you and you learn from us – it is working."*

Family/Staff member, 2019

In evaluation interviews, First Nations families/staff were not specifically asked about training and professional development. However, five people (n=27) referred to training at Children's Ground. Of this, four reported that more training is needed for staff (three individuals referred to governance, computer training or first aid), one referred to Children's Ground needing more resources to increase employment and training, and one referred to training at Children's Ground as a strength and good opportunity.



<sup>108</sup> Note, in 2017 this data was not collected to a high enough quality for inclusion.



## Enterprise

The Economic Development & Wellbeing platform includes the development of local enterprises. As noted, First Nations educators developed cultural learning resources that were used in early learning sessions for language, literacy and numeracy development. As development progressed, the books and resources moved from being simple laminated pages, to books published on 'do-it-yourself' websites and then to using modern mediums such as iPads with community illustrated artwork and then to formal publishing. In 2019 these bilingual books and related learning resources became the first community enterprise established through Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia).

Within this enterprise, 37 First Nations people were employed as authors, illustrators and in multi-media. Enterprise products included books, posters and illustrations being used for t-shirts, cards and other merchandise. As part of the enterprise development people engaged in relevant training related to product development, marketing, sales, and intellectual and cultural property.

By the end of 2019, five books had been written and illustrated by First Nations educators, authors and artists. They have been published with ISBNs and are available in bookshops and online. The resources are in multiple languages and include stories about land, animals, plants, seasons, traditional warning signs and more. Those involved in producing the books receive a percentage of every sale.



## Social strength (family health, service access and social connectedness)

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 social strengthening of families includes physical health, mental health, cultural health, connectedness, interpersonal relationships, family living circumstances and safety. This is achieved through the following:

- Supporting responses to immediate every-day life stressors
  - Weekly support for Elders for shopping, banking, housing security, food security, family stress etc
  - Practical social and emotional wellbeing support for individuals and families experiencing crisis including family violence
- Family health promotion
- Counselling and social and emotional wellbeing
- Strengthening cultural life, roles and responsibilities
- Creating and supporting environments of safety and inclusion
- Creating opportunities for employment
- Creating opportunities for cultural and social connection

As reported previously, Children's Ground does not work by referral. As the staff and families who lead Children's Ground experience everyday stress, the above support is always apparent. Much of the everyday general support is not recorded. Areas of family health, social and emotional wellbeing, social and cultural connectedness and employment are formally recorded as part of data collection. However, it is also apparent that much of the everyday general incidental support provided to First Nations staff and families in response to the everyday stressors affecting people's lives has not been recorded. This means that the reported levels of support required and provided should be considered conservative.

## Family health and wellbeing promotion and support

Children's Ground works in communities where health burdens are extreme. Ill-health is so commonplace that people often live with it and present late, chronic illness is endemic and health is often not prioritised by people until it is disabling. Cultural health interventions are often a first choice for many families, but are difficult to access due to disruption from colonisation.

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 health conversations that occur where people are comfortable, in their 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 barriers to access, while making health and wellbeing a visible part of everyday life.



Over the first years of implementing the CG Approach, the role of the team is to increase access to and engagement of children and families in health promotion and health support. Health promotion is delivered in both universal and targeted ways and focuses on engaging and empowering families in health information, education and planning and health behaviour.

The goal is for families to feel empowered over their health with the resources and information needed to make positive health and wellbeing choices. Due to pervasive trauma, counselling and social and emotional wellbeing is central to the health framework. The approach also promotes cultural health.

The Family Health team and all staff also provide health and wellbeing support. Health support complements but differs from health promotion in that it seeks to support families to reduce barriers experienced in their engagement with health services and systems (including and external to Children's Ground). Improved access to health services is supported through service coordination and liaison, transport to and from health clinic appointments, explaining and clarifying health information before and after clinical health appointments as required and attending health appointments with families at their request. It also includes partnership initiatives with clinical health providers. Access to cultural health interventions such as Angangkeroes (traditional healers) and bush medicines is also supported.

The most prevalent 'reasons for engagement' in health promotion and support include:

- Maternal health
- Chronic health conditions
- General health
- Dental/oral health
- Nutrition and food security
- Anaemia
- Skin health
- Ear health
- Medication management
- Concerns for child behaviour
- Cultural health/loss
- Family violence
- Community/family conflict/safety
- Family worries
- Anxiety/worry/spirit/depression
- Family death/grief/loss
- Funeral support
- Alcohol and other drug misuse
- Power/electricity security
- Housing security (overcrowding and homelessness)
- Environmental health
- Waste and rubbish management
- Housing safety



## Progress measures:

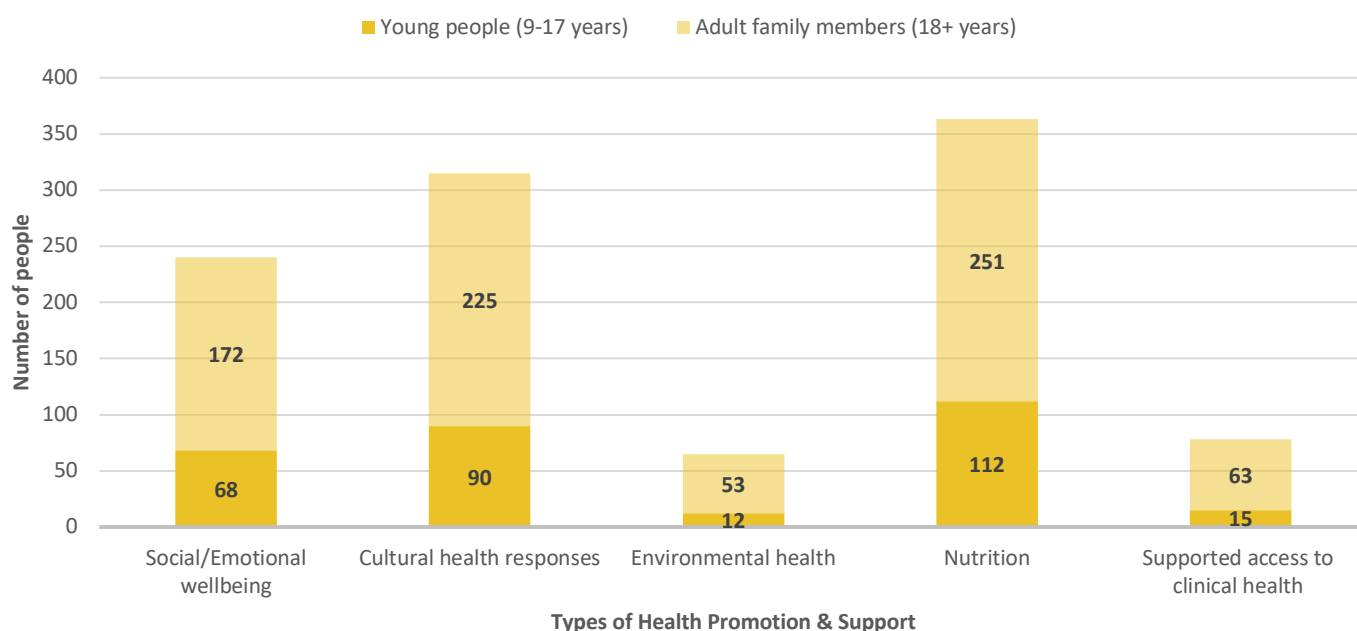
- Families have increased access to health promotion and support
- Number of families engaged in health promotion and support

Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that: ***“Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices..., have the right to access, without any discrimination, all social and health services... [and] have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”***<sup>109</sup>.

From July 2018 and in 2019, 487 family members engaged in health promotion and support. This included 150 young people (9-17 years) and 337 adult family members (18+ years).

Graph 12 shows the number of family members (young people and adults aged 9+ years) engaged in various types of family health and wellbeing promotion and support.

**Graph 12: Number of family members engaged health promotion and support, by age group and type**



The multiple health risks experienced by families are addressed through a range of health activities. The team integrates access to services and supports. Children’s Ground staff work to understand the multiple needs of families and to coordinate service response.

First Nations families/staff were asked to ‘think about places you get help when you have worries about children’s/adult’s physical health (body and nutrition) and emotional health (mind and behaviour), and how they are now compared to before Children’s Ground started’.

100% (n=23) of families/staff reported increased access to services for physical and emotional health and wellbeing, reporting access was better or much better. For both physical and emotional health and wellbeing, 65% of families/staff reported better and 35% reported much better.

These quotes are individual perspectives and not representative of strong evaluation themes.

*“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.”*

*“Children’s Ground listens to us. Helps us sort whatever problems we have – housing, Centrelink, health, food vouchers, training and conferences, training for young ones too [youth].”*

*“More parents are getting into the health too. Checking themselves out as well.”*

*“We don’t need to be pressured, we can ask for support and we just get it – no problems. That is good, knowing that you have that there if you need.”*

**Family/Staff members, 2019**

<sup>109</sup> UN General Assembly, 2007. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295



## Social connectedness

Social connectedness is a protective measure for social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.<sup>110 111</sup> For First Nations people, social and emotional wellbeing includes the individual and community and involves cultural, kinship, social, physical and spiritual wellbeing.<sup>112 113</sup>

The CG Approach places a focus on community celebrations and connection. Creating opportunities to celebrate strength is a key strategy for communities that experience persistent trauma and stress to increase social and cultural capital within and across family groups and communities.

Children's Ground's capacity to hold regular events and celebrations was impacted by limited resources. However, from 2017 to 2019, 562 people engaged in 44 family/community celebrations and events. These included family nights, cultural camps, special events/celebrations and school holiday programs. The events created a range of important opportunities including:

- Safe social environments
- Strengthening social and family connections
- Strengthening the connection between land, culture and kinship
- Celebrating children
- Access to entertainment
- Healing during times of sorry business and community conflict

For many families, social gatherings often occur at funerals. The focus on celebration aims to increase regular positive and supportive events for children and families. The evaluation found that these events were so valued that they transcended times of heightened community tension and supported people through sorry business. Families chose to come together during these periods to create safety, to set aside time to celebrate life and to heal and connect during sad times.

The following is a story of a particularly important community celebration that occurred and that is indicative of the circumstances and context surrounding Children's Ground family and community events. It shows how the CG Approach has begun to provide places of safety and opportunities to contribute to strengthening family and community.

### Social/Emotional wellbeing and safety in the midst of unrest

*The death of a young person affected all our families. It also created significant community tension due to the circumstances surrounding the death. Families were living in a 'Sorry camp' for a long period of time.*

*Family (parents, siblings and grandparents) of the deceased engaged in family evenings at The Children's Ground Hub during this period. A safe environment allowed families to come together with children and young people. At the request of families to honour the young person, a special event was held. This healing event included families coming together who were experiencing ongoing violent tensions.*

*Over 100 people attended. One family member commented that it was only possible because it was held at a 'place of safety'. We continue to be guided by our Elders and work with families to honour and respect a way forward in what can seem like insurmountable sadness.*

*As the year progressed, while tensions continued, families came together on regular occasions to enjoy community celebrations. During these times, families were able to connect in positive circumstances, children were able to experience families at peace with one another and the cultural and social strength in their community.*

*"Celebrations and family nights are an important part of what we do. They are a chance for everyone to come together and be proud of what we're achieving."*

**Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance)**

<sup>110</sup> Saeri, A.K., Cruwys, T., Barlow, F.K., Stronge, S., Sibley, C.G.. 2018. Social connectedness improves public mental health: Investigating bidirectional relationships in the New Zealand attitudes and values survey; *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 52(4) 365– 374

<sup>111</sup> Ziggi Ivan Santini, Z.I., Jose, P.E., Cornwell, E.Y., Koyanagi, A., Nielsen, L., Hinrichsen, C., Meilstrup, C., Madsen, K.R., Koushede, V.. 2020. Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and symptoms of depression and anxiety among older Americans (NSHAP): a longitudinal mediation analysis; *The Lancet*; Open Access

<sup>112</sup> Gee, G., Dudgeon, P., Schultz, C., Hart, A., Kelly, K.. 2014. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. In Dudgeon, P., Milroy, H., Walker, R. (Ed.), *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 55-68). Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

<sup>113</sup> Swan P, Raphael B.. 1995. *Ways forward*, vol. 1 & 2. National consultancy report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health





Social connection and family strengthening are also created through Children's Ground's placed based, intergenerational approach. This creates soft entry points through family connection. Children and families became involved in early learning, employment and governance with Children's Ground through their family members.

Further evaluation of the extent to which Children's Ground has started building social capital in communities is included in the next section under 'Change and impact for community'.

Growing family engagement and social connectedness is also important in building to engagement of a critical mass of children and their families within each community. The early foundations of First Nations employment, governance, increased service access and social and cultural strengthening have seen increased family-to-family Walk and Talk across the communities. The following quotes offer insight into how family-to-family engagement occurred, and how intergenerational family engagement contributes to family strengthening:

*"I say come, then you'll see - it's good, it's right, it's where families get together, work together."*

*"First mum [grandma] use to go with the kids [to CG] then I [mother] started going with the baby. After coming for a while I asked if I could work, and they signed me up. It's my first job."*

*"We've got the voice to talk, we are the cultural people. We're leading the way and then we know where to get families. We know where the family lives and where their connection is."*

*"Well, there's no other jobs around Alice... I used to go with my man and sit down all day... Like, I didn't even know like what Children's Ground was before. And then I started going with mum all the time and then I just got this job and plus, it's real good to see our little young ones coming along every time."*

*"I tell them families it's like preschool but for everyone - all families."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

## Summary

Family social and economic strength are interrelated. Achieving this is a long-term outcome, given the burden of stress that is endemic across families. Short-term early impact is evident through engagement in employment, health promotion and social connectedness. These indicators are important foundations to increasing social, cultural and economic wellbeing in communities.

Engagement in employment has been evidenced as positive for those employed and for providing visible role models for children, young people and adults within each community. The processes and systems that have enabled First Nations employment include the strength based, flexible employment model. Children's Ground creates employment for First Nations people in cultural skills-based positions and Western-trained positions. At the same time, key barriers to engagement are reduced, including language, transport and employment conditions. Innovative, variable contracts operate in a non-punitive way when people cannot engage in employment for periods of time due to cultural responsibilities or life stressors.

Because good health and social strength influence an individual's capacity to engage in employment, the reported increased access to, and high engagement in, whole of family health services and supports is considered an important achievement and early impact of the CG Approach. Improved access to cultural health practices is a critical part of health promotion for families, and reportedly a key driver of engagement in learning, employment and health.

While family and community events and celebrations have not been held as regularly as intended, the positive impact of events was evidenced. First Nations communities have inherent strength in social connection through kinship and cultural life. Children's Ground families used this strength and foundation to increase and improve family and community life.

# Change and impact for community

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework identified three key outcome areas at a community level:

- **The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing**
- **The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity**
- **Communities are safe and inclusive**

Long term 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.



***“There are worsening or unacceptably high levels of poor outcomes among children and young people across a wide range of domains, including physical and mental health, and social and academic functioning... This is a particular problem in communities where social disadvantage has become entrenched, leading to intergenerational disadvantage and poorer outcomes for children and families... In such neighbourhoods, there tends to be a narrower range of health, education and community services available, and services are more difficult to access”<sup>114</sup>.***

Community outcomes are expected to take 20-25 years to be achieved. Children's Ground's ultimate outcome is to achieve equity, justice and wellbeing at a community level - to evidence a system that can create transformational change and break through complex entrenched disadvantage across whole populations.

Building the social, cultural and economic capital within the community over the course of a generation is central to long term impact for Children's Ground.

National and international evidence<sup>115</sup> across all sectors (education, housing, health, justice, employment) shows the enduring systems failures that First Nations communities live with. First Nations people speak to the ongoing racism, injustice and pain that manifests in their everyday lives.

It will take a generation, at least, to shift the foundation for the next generation. The community outcomes are expected to be achieved when a critical mass of children has grown up and has experienced equity across key determinants for wellbeing. Their children will experience the benefits and we will see enduring change emerge.

<sup>114</sup> Moore, T. McDonald, M., McHugh-Dillon, H and West, S.. 2016. Community engagement A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families; The Australian Institute of Family Studies, CFCA Paper No. 39

<sup>115</sup> Closing the Gap, Productivity Commission reports, Health Performance Indicators, government inquiries, Royal Commissions, IAHW, ABS, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples etc



## Community Context (prevalence of social stress experienced by community)

Each of the four communities leading Children's Ground are impacted significantly and differently by invasion and colonisation. As discussed in the community profile, some families do live on their homelands, but most live in the township of Alice Springs. The removal of people from their traditional lands has created profound trauma and resulted in an enduring challenge to connect with and/or re-establish their lives on their lands.

In an evaluation meeting to look at baseline trauma and stress, Elders and leaders reflected on a wide range of experiences:

- 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 & continue to resist
- Alcohol/drugs/tea/sugar/tobacco
- Basics card - control of your 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 & 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 is worse & increases argument
- Funerals
- Sadness for everyone
- Accidents, suspicious death, missing person
- Alcohol-related death, domestic violence
- Medical conditions
- Deaths in custody
- Black Lives Matter



From July 2017 to December 2019, regular traumatic events impacted Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe and the broader community. Regular funerals have been experienced by all First Nations staff and families. The death of family members was due to ill-health and traumatic events including violence, suicide, deaths in custody and vehicle accidents. Families have experienced the loss of Elders, adults and young people. They have lost siblings, parents, grandparents and children.

Traumatic events that result from violence, accidents and untimely deaths resonate through the community. In addition to profound and persistent grief, these events can lead to significant unrest as families work through cultural responsibilities and law. In Arrernte culture, collective responsibility means that whole families and communities can be affected for lengthy periods of time. One death resulted in the relocation of people from their homes into other towns for nearly twelve months as community tensions were managed. The interruption of Arrernte law systems as a result of colonisation impacted the ability of Elders to resolve these matters through strict cultural protocols. Alcohol and social media are key contributors to sustained family conflict.

The death of Kumanjayi Walker at the hands of the police in 2019 was deeply felt across the Central Australian region. For families of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, his death highlighted the living risk, fear and pervasive presence of police in their lives.

Financial stress, cultural stress and social stress are constant, everyday realities for families. Individuals and families report their experience of racism, police intimidation, and engagement with the criminal justice and child welfare systems. People express a range of worries for themselves, family members and young people. Alcohol and other drugs are pervasive and fuel regular family violence. Social, emotional and cultural wellbeing is under continuous threat. Adverse childhood experience and ongoing hypervigilance and trauma impact lifelong health and wellbeing.

Families and individuals are resilient in the face of complex life stressors. The importance of culture as key to living with and mitigating the impact of colonisation is expressed strongly by Elders and adults and has been evidenced in the evaluation.

The context of persistent grief and trauma makes the efforts and outcomes achieved by families at Children's Ground more outstanding. The long-term community outcome is to see the prevalence of trauma, grief and conflict decrease significantly.

*"All Aboriginal people live under all these things. It's every day life. It never stops."*

First Nations staff member, 2020

### Short-term progress measures

- **First Nations governance is established, inclusive and active:** Reported on in section Principle: 'Child, family & community led'.
- **Community engages in cultural teaching and learning:** Reported on in section Outcome: Children know their history and feel confident in their culture.
- **Community reports improvement in empowerment:** Reported on in this section and also evidenced in Principle: 'Child, family & community led' and by data and quotes from First Nations people throughout the report.
- **Community has increased access to and engagement in economic and employment opportunities:** Reported on in section Outcome: Family economic strength.
- **Community enjoys social and cultural events, activities and celebrations:** Reported on in section Outcomes: Family involvement with their children and family social strength.
- **Prevalence of social stress:** Reported on as a baseline at the beginning of this Community Outcomes section.
- **Community has access to cultural and physically safe intergenerational environments:** Reported on in this section. Also see section Principles: 'In community' and 'Combining the old and new'.
- **Community has access to cultural and physically safe intergenerational environments and reports improved cultural and physical safety:** Reported on in this section.

### 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

The development and progress in local governance has been reported through the report. Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme has been central to this.

Each community has identified increased empowerment and the positive impact of leading the planning, directing and delivery of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe in their own communities and more broadly across the region. This has been evidenced by data and quotes from First Nations people.

There has been a clearly reported increase in feelings of empowerment which is an important early impact and foundation for achieving outcomes at all levels – for children, families and communities.



During the period of this evaluation, leadership by members of the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance) extended beyond the work in their communities to the national stage. Children's Ground is working at a national level to influence practice and policy reform to achieve long term systemic change.

The following presents work by community leaders in a range of contexts:

- Presenting the work of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe at 10 conferences, including one international
- In 2019, leaders hosted the first meeting of First Nations cultural education specialists leading to the establishment of the National First Nations Education Network, Utyerre Apanpe. Utyerre Apanpe is leading national systems reform to achieve First Nations led education in Australia. These meetings continued into 2020 and 2021
- First Nations leaders have been involved as both producers and advisors on the film *In My Blood it Runs*, which tells the story of Djuwan, a 10 year old boy living in one of the four communities. Family members, Elders and leaders were instrumental in bringing this film to the world, highlighting the human rights challenges faced by children, the serious challenges in education and the strength of culture and family

Engagement and leadership in local, national and international work and advocacy for First Nations rights has been an important focus for Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme and has contributed to empowerment, governance and intergenerational leadership.



## Next generation leadership

The extent to which community members engaged in cultural knowledge and practice has been reported throughout, with a focus on child cultural learning. A key theme to emerge from evaluation interviews with First Nations families and staff was the extent of young people and young adults learning their language and culture alongside the children. The evaluation also identified the emergence and growth of young leaders as a strength in delivery over the first three years. The engagement of young people was enabled by being in-community, flexibility of delivery and being community led.

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.

The quotes below are about and from next generation cultural and community leaders.

*"The young generation are learning what they need to – they get it from home, from Children's Ground and healing centre [Akeyulerre]. We need more young people to come and join in and to help their little brothers and sisters and then we will all be happy together."*

*"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."*

*"The young ones [youth] are really trying. They want to know more and stand in our shoes one day. I tell them one day we will get you to do the presentations [about CG] and talk to people."*

*"I see potential, a lot of potential, with some of the younger staff. I am hoping that I can help them, work with them a little bit... being able to just talk with me and the other Aboriginal staff and support them too. I see they are feeling more confident about things. They should. They are just amazing."*

*"I didn't even know how to read and write in Arrernte... We're getting more support from Elders just being here. I'm learning to write in Arrernte and greet in Arrernte and read. I'll keep practising – keep practising till I get it right... because I didn't have that growing up."*

*"The younger parents are learning as well. But the older ones, they already know, but our younger, the middle younger ones, are learning as well, with the children."*

*"People [next generation leaders] go out there with them [on country learning with Elders, children and families]. And at the same time, they teaching our young people – they are still learning from the old people as well."*

*"The young mothers like, they might be there for a little one, and they learn to do some dance too. Some young girls don't really know, you know, the young mothers. They don't really know about culture and things, even for like, smoking and stuff, for the little ones. They are learning too."*

*"Need more employment for our young people. More education so they can be in both worlds and walk in both worlds. And not forget their culture and language. And work and get supported through their education, you know. So they're not feeling lost, out of place, because that's what most kids do. That's how they feel."*

*Family/Staff members, 2019*

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 and the effect on long-term wellbeing of their community is evident.

The above speaks to the strength-based principle of Children's Ground – assuming and celebrating ability. It shows that building upon the talent and strength of children, young people, families and communities can start to create a new lived experience.





### Intergenerational inclusion and safety

Creating intergenerational environments of safety, inclusion and development is key in the long-term strategy of increasing social, cultural and economic capital. In a practical sense, this begins with a focus on place-based delivery. For Children's Ground, this does not mean delivering activities within community but being based in the community and being part of the fabric of social and community life.

Over the period of the evaluation, Children's Ground was effective in establishing intergenerational environments of physical and cultural safety with each community. However, place-based delivery was not implemented as intended due to limited resources.

Without being directly asked about feelings of safety, 63% of families/staff reported feeling safe, comfortable or free at Children's Ground.

First Nations systems of education, health, society and law are upheld through intergenerational structures and are fundamental to community wellbeing. Data throughout this report has evidenced that from 2017-19, Children's Ground effectively increased and strengthened intergenerational engagement of children, young people, adults and Elders, across five generations.

**Safety** is an explicit standard of Children's Ground that is highlighted as part of daily operations and governance. The aim is to expand safety as a norm, expectation and lived reality and to model community and cultural standards.

- **Cultural safety** has been reported throughout the evaluation. Privileging the culture and identity of communities has been effectively achieved and promoted by Children's Ground through the period of the evaluation.
- **Physical and emotional safety.** Violence and arguments are not accepted within the boundaries of Children's Ground. If breaches of these standards occur, they are managed by key cultural Elders and relevant families who together decide on the responses and resolution.

**Inclusion.** Children's Ground is owned by the community, not individuals or select groups. Governance and management work hard to maintain this in the context of high community and family stress. Some First Nations family/staff members referred to holding themselves and their family accountable to these standards.



The following quotes highlight the strengthening of safety and empowerment for communities.

*"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."*

*It's just that there's sometime - like there's a bit of fighting and arguing and stuff like that [in families]. But people still come back. [asked why people come back]... Well what I can say for myself is you come back because you want to be here to give yourself to the kids - to help the kids and to create this environment - a learning environment for our little children. And give them an example too. And for all young people that come here, setting a good example. Because they'll be the next leaders. Next generation that do want to continue the children's learning.*

*"When somebody new comes, I just say, 'If you're going to be here, you've got to respect the people. That's not a place for arguments. That's not a place for bullying. That's a place for everybody to feel safe,' that's what I say."*

*"Just being at Children's Ground and learning about healthy food and stuff like that. I think that's really important for a child's growth as well, you know, and like, having a safe environment. And know that there is a parent there that is going to look after your children and you're supposed to keep them safe and the family safe too."*

*"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."*

*"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."*



*"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."*

*"Families feel proud. No one has ever done that for us before."*

*"I'm very comfortable here - it's my second home. It's family. Children's Ground is family."*

Family/Staff members, 2019

It is too early to expect community level changes in safety and inclusion. However, the determination with which families hold and express safety within Children's Ground is a positive role model for children.

## Summary

Early progress in community outcomes was evidenced in First Nations Governance, community inclusion and safety, economic inclusion and cultural and social community level engagement.

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.

Each of these are considered as central building blocks for long-term community level change over the 25-year CG Approach.





# Western early impact analysis

## What progress occurred within Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe towards longer term impact?

This evaluation was designed to provide a baseline analysis for Central Australia while assessing any early-stage impact of the 'growth' model of the CG Approach. While still in the early stages of implementation, the emerging impact findings are consistent with those from the evaluation of Kakadu West Arnhem - that the CG Approach is able to achieve important, early-stage impact with children, families and communities.

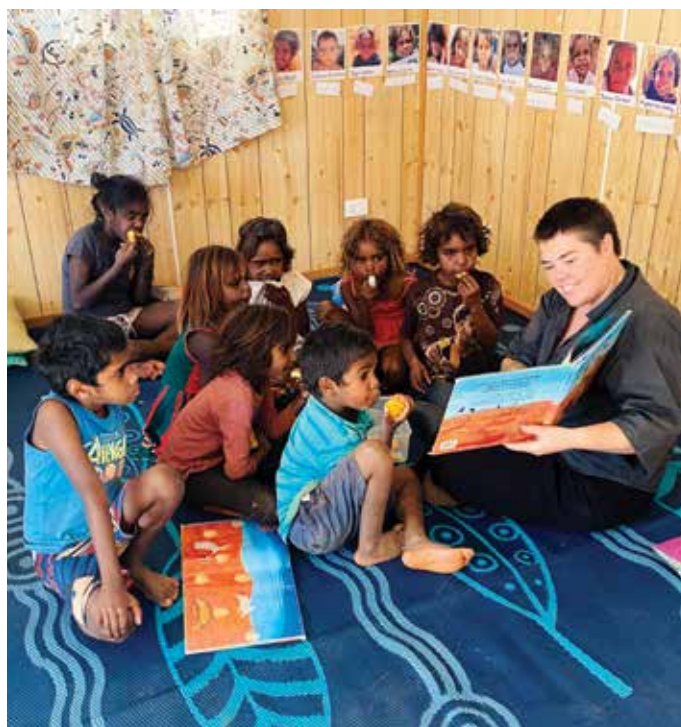
Key areas of impact relate to equitable access and engaging a new cohort of children, young people and adults in early years learning, health promotion, employment, governance and decision making. The strengthening of cultural life, learning and connection to country was also evident. For many, this was the beginning of a new normal. The engagement in each of these protective factors is critical early progress in minimising risks to long term poverty, disadvantage, trauma, ill-health and poor mental health for children and families. The strengthening of first culture and language and local decision-making were demonstrated as key drivers and enablers of early impact.

This evaluation provides an important baseline for long term impact evaluation.

### Early childhood education

Longitudinal research has found a correlation between high quality early years learning and improved development, education, mental health, economic and social outcomes through life.<sup>116 117 118 119</sup> This evaluation demonstrates that the CG Approach is aligned with leading evidence and practice. In the first three years, Children's Ground's dedicated focus on early years learning and health for children aged 0-5 years (and their family) resulted in the engagement of a new cohort of children in learning and health promotion.

Over a short period of time and with limited resources, Children's Ground achieved engagement in early years learning and health promotion at levels previously not experienced by children and families within the four communities. The numbers of children engaging in early years learning with Children's Ground increased each year and grew to a critical mass (82%) of the child service population. This indicates that barriers to previous engagement were reduced - suggesting the CG Approach is an enabler for child engagement in early years learning.



Globally, there has been little research undertaken on the impact of early years learning and wellbeing in First Nations communities. McTurk, et al. (2008) undertook a comprehensive review of international and Australian literature relating to school readiness, assessment, risk and protective factors and interventions and its implications for schooling for First Nations children in Australia. Their research identified that the following factors support the engagement and success of First Nations children in education<sup>120</sup>:

- High quality early childhood education and learning rich environments
- Home visit health programs
- Local Aboriginal staff
- Community ownership of programs
- Parent engagement
- Inclusion of elders and extended family structures
- Community-based early interventions

This evaluation demonstrates that the CG Approach incorporates each of these and additional elements, and that they are being evidenced as important foundations for long term impact. Critical to this were the structural and process enablers of 'how' the CG Approach is delivered.

<sup>116</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2015. Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development: working paper. Cat. no. CWS 53. Canberra: AIHW

<sup>117</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. 2004. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from pre-school to end of key stage 1. Nottingham, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skill

<sup>118</sup> Arnold, C., Bartlett, K., Gowani, S., Merali, R. 2007. Is everybody ready? Readiness, transition and continuity: Reflections and moving forward. Working Paper 41. Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Hague, The Netherlands

<sup>119</sup> Silburn SR, Nutton G, Arney F, Moss B. 2011. The First 5 Years: Starting Early. Topical paper commissioned for the public consultations on the Northern Territory Early Childhood Plan. Darwin: Northern Territory Government

<sup>120</sup> McTurk, N; Nutton, G; Lea, T; Robinson, G; Carapetis, J. 2008. The School Readiness of Australian Indigenous Children: A Review of the literature; Charles Darwin University; Menzies School of Health Research

## Child, maternal and whole of family health

***“For children to do well, their families have to do well. And for families to do well, their community must do well”<sup>121</sup>.***

Education is a key social determinant for health. At the same time, health is a key determinant for education. The burden of ill-health and poor mental health in families impacts children. Children's Ground families live with a high burden of ill-health and trauma.

The pervasive and chronic ill health experienced by First Nations people of all ages is widely understood<sup>122</sup>. First Nations children experience a range of serious health issues - far greater than other children<sup>123</sup>. This increases in prevalence the more remote children live<sup>124</sup> - and nearly all are preventable illnesses.

For children, health impacts their ability to engage, learn and develop and creates serious chronic health risks for adulthood.<sup>125 126</sup> Common childhood infections include otitis media, skin diseases, respiratory infections, gastroenteritis, anaemia and oral disease.<sup>127 128</sup> The prevalence of childhood hearing loss, rheumatic heart disease and impetigo are some of the highest in the world, particularly in the Northern Territory.<sup>129 130 131 132</sup>

In the delivery of universal and targeted health promotion and early intervention support, Children's Ground demonstrated high levels of child and family engagement in preventative health. Health promotion, education and behaviours have specifically targeted the underlying causes of common childhood infections and illnesses, as well as common health conditions in young people and adults.

Prevention is difficult to measure in the short term. Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing is consistent with World Health Organisation's agenda for Health Promotion:

***Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health<sup>133</sup>.***

The World Health Organisation highlights that reducing health inequalities requires a focus on addressing the social determinants of health<sup>134</sup>. These determinants are broad and include economic, cultural, educational, structural, social, economic and political factors.

The delivery of comprehensive health promotion is embedded within the full CG Approach that works across each of these key social determinants for health.

*“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**

Children's Ground's health promotion includes health literacy, access, education, community action and advocacy. A focus on maternal and child health alongside family and community level health promotion created the conditions for broad health engagement. Over the first three years, there was a strong emphasis on early childhood and family nutrition. The benefit of nutrition on both health and education is evident in the literature and suggests that integrating nutrition into early childhood learning benefits child development.<sup>135 136</sup>

Children's Ground also focused on the emotional health of children through targeted trauma informed practice in early childhood, supporting emotional regulation, safety and play based delivery. The impact of toxic stress on child development and future wellbeing is well documented and any reduction of stress for children may benefit both health and learning outcomes<sup>137</sup>. The explicit focus on emotional literacy and wellbeing was used to engage and support children, many of whom have been exposed to trauma and stress, in their learning and development.

Importantly, Children's Ground's whole of family and community approach also enabled broad engagement in health promotion of families alongside their children and grandchildren, with children, young people and adults increasing their health literacy together. Universal delivery of health promotion provided a soft entry point for family level health education, with targeted follow-up health promotion, service access and support.

High levels of child and family engagement in health promotion are promising and may alleviate (short-term) and mitigate (longer-term) preventable illness, death and health burdens for infants, children and young people. This will improve outcomes in health, education and wellbeing through life. The evaluation shows improved health literacy and healthy behaviours in both Western and First Nations practices and knowledge.

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126 Bailie, R., Stevens, M., McDonald, E., Brewster, D., Guthridge, S. 2010. Exploring cross-sectional associations between common childhood illness, housing and social conditions in remote Australian Aboriginal communities. *BMC Public Health* 10, 147

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129 Davidson, L., Knight J., and Bowen A. C. 2019. Skin infections in Australian Aboriginal children: a narrative review *Med J Aust* 2020; 212 (5): 231-237. Published online

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136 Silburn SR, Nutton G, Arney F, Moss B. 2011. The First 5 Years: Starting Early. Topical paper commissioned for the public consultations on the Northern Territory Early Childhood Plan. Darwin: Northern Territory Government

137 Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). Applying the Science of Child Development in Child Welfare Systems. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>



## First language and cultural protection

Western evidence shows that language and cultural barriers impact health outcomes.<sup>138 139</sup> International evidence has found that cultural continuity and empowerment is a protective factor against youth suicide<sup>140</sup>.

***“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<sup>141</sup>”.***

Children’s Ground established the beginnings of a bilingual approach that promotes first language use. This evaluation demonstrates that, for the first time, children are being consistently offered early years learning through their first cultures and languages. The findings suggest that this has been a significant enabler in both child and family engagement in learning. By privileging first language, knowledge systems and cultural practices, the CG Approach has strengthened the identity, wellbeing, connectedness and cultural foundation for children. These culturally protective factors are linked with improved health and mental health.

An unanticipated outcome was the extent to which First Nations families and staff reported that young people and families were learning their first language and culture alongside the children. This was identified as important for the next generation’s cultural leadership, transmission, integrity and preservation.



## Family engagement

Western evidence demonstrates that home environments are the most important influences on children’s early development and learning<sup>142</sup>. For children who face adverse childhood experiences, key relationships, stability and safety can be critical in preventing long term negative impact<sup>143</sup>. The Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) recommends a focus not only on the home conditions for children but the capability and wellbeing of the key adults in the life of the child to achieve improved outcomes.

In First Nations culture, kinship and cultural lore underpin a complex and established system of early childhood development and care. Therefore, ‘Families walking alongside their children’ is a key headline indicator established by First Nations leaders in Central Australia and Kakadu West Arnhem. Consistent with the Western evidence base, First Nations people recognise the central role of families in the development and wellbeing of children.

Evidence from this evaluation shows that Children’s Ground was successful in engaging families in both the health and education of children. Culturally designed delivery has been a key driver of family engagement. Local First Nations employment and prioritising of local governance means that families guided early learning policy development and led delivery, ensuring cultural standards were embedded in practice. Standards included children always attending early learning accompanied by a family member. This responds to responsibilities and safety that particular kinship structures provide around the child.

The cultural expertise within families was central to their involvement in delivery. This not only empowered children in their learning - it empowered adults as well. Families were not coming to Children’s Ground seeking help; they were coming to lead, deliver and evaluate services for their children and communities. This shifted the power differential from traditional service systems of disempowered users who are defined by a deficit to an empowering service system driven by users. The cultural authority in design also created a protective factor from racism and exclusion. The practice principles, structures and systems at the local and organisational level were the drivers and enablers of early impact of high family engagement.

Western research states that the role of families and the engagement of children in early childhood education are considered the most important influencers on long-term life outcomes<sup>144</sup>. Children’s Ground’s evaluation findings suggest that the foundation for long term impact have been established through the active engagement, inclusion and leadership of families in the lives of their children.

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141 UNESCO. 2001. Education and Cultural Diversity [www.unesco.org/education](http://www.unesco.org/education)

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## Economic and social wellbeing

The importance of employment is not only seen in the engagement of families, but also in the context of the wellbeing of families. Western research has shown the relationship between economic and social deprivation and shortened life expectancy and health inequalities<sup>145</sup>, and the impact on child learning and wellbeing outcomes<sup>146</sup>. Employment is a key determinant in achieving educational and health equity.

While income has increased in urban Australia, there has been an income decline in very remote areas. Poverty rates increase with remoteness and are particularly prevalent in the Northern Territory<sup>147</sup>. Many adults and young people who were employed in the delivery of Children's Ground were previously under or unemployed and all are living in communities of high economic stress.

The CG Approach was successful in reducing barriers to employment for those experiencing chronic and intergenerational unemployment and poverty. Community members reflected that employment had instilled confidence at the individual and family level. For some families, adult employment has become a new role model and norm for the next generation of children. Children experienced learning and health environments in which their families were role modelling safety and employment and were actively engaged in their children's learning and wellbeing.



## Community level change

While it is too early to determine community level impact, early evidence suggests a strengthening of community safety, community governance and community connectedness.

Research shows that people with poor social connectedness have compromised mental and physical health and poorer life expectancy than those with strong social connectedness<sup>148</sup>. 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. A focus on creating places of safety, inclusion, cultural and community celebration were drivers for connection. Qualitative feedback highlighted the positive impact on individuals and children on the strengthening of social, cultural and community connection.

Children's Ground sets out to create the conditions for a different life experience for the current generation of children and to achieve whole of community long term change. From these first years of implementing the CG Approach, the day-to-day life of the children of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe looks different. While this cannot be considered sustained change, it is a positive beginning of a 25-year journey. Their change has been mobilised by their families and communities and through their cultures and languages. Access to educational and health promotion services and to employment has been achieved, moving toward equity. Culturally led and responsive design and delivery has minimised racism and created cultural security for children and their families. Based on national and international research, the conditions to achieve long term outcomes for children are being established by Children's Ground.

<sup>145</sup> Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P., Morrison J.. 2020. Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review ten years on. London: Institute of Health Equity

<sup>146</sup> Waldfogel J.. 2004. Social mobility, life chances, and the early years. London: London School of Economics

<sup>147</sup> Markham, F and Biddle, N.. 2016. Income, Poverty and Inequality; census paper 2 Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU

<sup>148</sup> Saeri, A. K. Cruwys, T., Barlow, F.K., Stronge S., and Sibley, C.G.. 2017. Social connectedness improves public mental health: Investigating bidirectional relationships in the New Zealand attitudes and values survey





## Section Four: Analysis and discussion



# Arrernte analysis

The First Nations analysis of Children's Ground's evaluation data is presented here. Key analysis findings are presented in Arrernte which have been translated from English. The remainder of the analysis is presented in English and has been taken directly from First Nations analysis sessions.

Translating large amounts of English text into Arrernte can be challenging and time consuming within Western concepts. As Children's Ground builds towards embedding First Nations evaluation methods, in the future, analysis can be undertaken in First Nations ways and languages and presented in first language. This will sit alongside Western methods and approaches presented in English.







*FOUR BLUE HALF CIRCLES WITH PEOPLE: These are kids, families and Elders in each area – all the Children's Ground communities. They are within their own traditional lands and communities – but are all together too. We connect within our communities and with other communities. This is bringing everyone together. Everyone leading Children's Ground for our children.*

***Tyeritye Arrernte mapele iwerre ineme. Anwerne angkentyele ileme nthakenhe mpwaretyeke. Arrpenhele iletyeke arrangkwe. Anwerne apurte-irremele decision mpwareme, tyeritye mape akwethe ankeme community-ke ante itne ileme involved-irretyeke. Anwerne apurte-irremele alakenhe mpwareme. Anwernenhe aweme. Arrantherre, tyeritye mperlkere mapele aweme. Anwerneke amparre arrwekele arrenele 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.**

- The way Children's Ground is working and who it is working with. It has to listen to us mob because that is where its focus is. Otherwise, it is not going to work – families won't keep coming.
- When we have meetings - it's open to anybody. You put your ideas in and tell everyone what you think about Children's Ground and talk up if you don't like what's happening here and if you like it.
- It's all about language. People feel confident and comfortable here. They feel like they can talk and speak up about things that they are passionate about. The whole thing is really about Aboriginal people engaging with Aboriginal people. If we weren't doing that well, we wouldn't have any of the Aboriginal people coming, working, bringing their children here, wanting us to go out and do Children's Ground in their communities.
- The First Nations voice is getting louder. We are hearing what everyone has to say, we are all sharing our ideas. They are listening to all our ideas. Especially listening to Elders.
- Coming to work and being a leader are two different things. Leadership is a weird thing. It's hard to say what it is and it's different for everybody. We have all been leaders in different ways. We have been getting more leaders and people who want to get a job here. But sometimes they don't come in because they can't make their mind up or have too many children or a lot going on. We start them off slow and show support.
- We all have it in us. Our leadership is having the confidence to lead with each other. We come to the governance meetings and the bosses are there [Elders] and we are all the bosses. We are the leaders. We are given the power by our Elders.



- People are listening to us. We are being heard. The people who know and who have always known are being heard and making the decisions.
- We are making the important decisions. Sometimes it's scary with big decisions to be made. If we feel chucked in the deep end we go around and look for the Elder. Children's Ground is good because they let you go and do that, they let it happen. Governance is hard sometimes because some of the decisions are big and we have to know what's going on first to make the decision.
- When we are making decisions people explain it in an easy way and not the hard words, but a lot more should be done in language, so it can be right, but it is also hard to translate.
- We feel comfortable speaking up. Non-First Nations staff are listening. Putting us first and hearing our ideas first.
- We get involved in the money story, but we could know more. They show us how much we spend. We meet with funders and government and show them what we are doing.
- There are some decisions that are made without the First Nations staff and sometimes that works the other way, the black fellas not listening.
- We are always planning – there is always stuff going. The men's team keep getting involved. Makes us feel involved and makes us feel good.
- Sometimes we make plans for learning and then it doesn't happen like that. There are some things like seasons and other cultural things that can change things, like sorry business and arguments.



**HALF CIRCLES:** These are people. The larger shapes are adults, the smaller shapes are children. The curved pictures with the hats represent male Elders. The curved pictures with scarfs are female Elders. The old people are standing behind the young people – we are all being led and taught by the old people.

**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 akaltye 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.**

- The Elders haven't stopped trying. They were all trying for years and now we are doing it and slowly growing.
- We are proud because our Elders are leading. Some are passing away and they will never see a change in the system, and that's sad.
- We always ask the Elders – we don't just go ahead and do things.

- Elders are important for the future – for both the young people and the little ones.
- There's only a few Elders and people who have the right knowledge to teach us and the children. We need more people who know the right knowledge and can sing the songs. We need to find all the songs. We worry some are lost.
- We learn from the old people, but there are some that need to learn more. Some old and young people don't know. We need to do more like learn from each other because some haven't been taught yet. They need our support for culture, and we can do more.
- Children need to respect their Elders and teachers. They are learning what they are responsible for with other people, with Elders and with each other. Respect is the most important thing for children to learn.



**STAR-LIKE SHAPE:** This is a fire, with the people sitting around it. Kids and families are learning and sharing around the fire – like we have done for so long. Elders are teaching our kids and young people, with the families all together – always working together.

**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.**

- We are getting more young leaders, but always need more. We'd like to see more of our people being a part of a dream, you know, that the old people had for Children's Ground.
- We need to get more young people working with the little ones, showing leadership.
- We need to show our young people how to speak up and have more young people. Stop feeling shame and talk up. They are trying hard and learning.
- We need more governance with the young people and Elders together, and then the men and women separate but together too.
- Young people are always getting advice from the old and young people that know culture. We support them so they don't feel shame for not knowing. Elders are here working because they can teach us as well as the children.
- We are learning from the Elders. This knowledge makes you feel powerful.







**FOOTPRINTS:** They are coming in and out – children and all families and communities interacting with each other and Children's Ground – sharing, caring and together. The footprints are us always looking back and following the Ancestors in our teaching and learning. The footprints always return to our country. We are creating the footprints with the children so they can build the life they want. Footprints mean we don't stay in one small place and Children's Ground is not in one place. It is in the community, the home and out bush – it is anywhere learning can happen, where the child's learning, health and life can be strengthened.

**BLUE AND WHITE DOTS AND YELLOW CURVES:** These are the knowledge – the teaching and learning travelling around (in homes/communities and Children's Ground). Within Children's Ground we have two-way learning – led by us. Children are learning First Nations language and culture and Western language and culture.

**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 things that they will not learn in town – cultural learning.**

- Children are learning their ways, who they are and where they belong. They are learning what they need to, so they can be a strong little Aboriginal person.
- There is always Arrernte and other languages spoken at Children's Ground. English is just another language.
- There is respect for First Nations people, the knowledge, the culture, their existence. Our families are being respected for their ways of doing things. Children's Ground is respecting that and we respect the Western way too. So both ways.
- We are helping all the children and families. We didn't have all of this before and the children and families are proud. They need to learn their languages and culture first – so we can keep our language strong for the next generations.
- We have started to do camps overnight and for a few days. This is our education. This is our classroom. Children are walking on their country and learning.
- Knowledge can come from very different places, and from old people and from the little ones, and from where you don't expect.
- Utyerre (to look). We are watching the children, seeing what they are learning. They are showing us what they are doing and how they are going. You don't know what is in their minds sometimes. We are asking them, watching them and giving them a fair go to learn.
- More children knowing who they are and where they come from. Their identity. Respecting each other and learning to respect. Children's Ground makes it possible.



- Children and families are learning and respecting their language. These children will help keep our language strong with the next generation.
- On country the children are free and more engaged. They have space. There is no blackboard at Children's Ground – we don't need it. The children want to learn and those little ones know more than the big ones now.
- The older children don't want to go to school, they want to come to Children's Ground and we want them too. They are important and need to be with family to learn. They fit in really well with the little ones because they have responsibility for these younger ones – they are teachers too and need to learn to be the teachers.
- We didn't have the opportunity through normal education. They never took all the children and parents to family nights on country. They never asked us what we wanted to teach children and how do we do it. For us it's on country learning with Elders. We didn't have the opportunity and at Children's Ground we have all that.





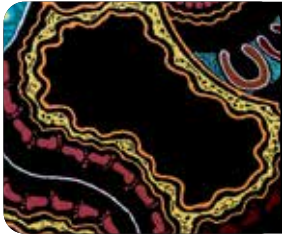
*SEMI-CIRCLE SHAPES: In the middle and all over this painting these represent ilthe/apmere which means home, where we live – our land, country and community. We make this a safe place for everyone. These are all the Children's Ground communities. These places will be safe for everyone. When new babies are born, they are in the middle. With the whole family watching, caring and teaching. We are all responsible for each child – to look after each child for everything they need – their mind, their spirit, their body and all their knowledge.*

**Ampe Kenhe ahelhe Ampere mwerre. Nhenge trouble apeke communityng aneme itn trouble renhe impertle alheme apmerekke. Ante trouble renhe apmerekke impeme warrke werne aknge etyerle. Anwerne angkerreme mwerre angkenlye ampe kenhe alelhenge. Ampe Kenhe ahelhele support eme ileme.**

**Children's Ground is a safe place: when there is trouble in communities - people leave their problems at home and don't bring them to work. We can work it out because there is no fear in telling Children's Ground what is going on. They support us.**

- All our staff and families need to be safe at Children's Ground. It is important for us to do our jobs in the right way so everyone is safe.
- People get pulled away for other stuff. Can't go there when people are arguing. We talk about how to stop the arguments and try to talk to fix it with each other. If we didn't have that rule about safety for everyone [at Children's Ground] there might be fighting all the time. Sometimes it just takes time, people realise that they made a mistake. That's why the Elders are good - to resolve the argument.
- The young mums and dads, they don't have any other place, just Children's Ground.
- Children want to be on country - they feel safe there.
- There's a lot of little children out there that don't want to learn. Because some little children are really shy to go into the mainstream schools. They get sad and they sort of feel lost. So, it's good to have Children's Ground where people talk language and who know the right way.
- We are seeing how the children feel. Some little ones get scared, some have problems, but they feel good at Children's Ground – they always want to come.
- We understand some families have a lot to worry about. We go to their homes and do learning at their place. We need to respect them and engage them.
- Families are talking to children in kind ways.
- Children are helping each other. They are teaching each other too.
- You see the children playing and talking together. They are communicating. They talk in language and play and are calm.
- Their attitudes have changed. We can see it.





*BLACK SPACES: This is where we all work together – because everything and everyone is connected to the land – where our country stops, someone else's starts – our kids need to know all the stories. It is also about us working with people outside of Children's Ground. We are sharing what we are doing at Children's Ground – with other communities and with people outside of Children's Ground.*

***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.**

- There are more opportunities for jobs, for people to work doing things they like. We have young people working and leading too.
- People are feeling proud. They have jobs something to wake up to. People are moving forward in their own lives and in our communities and where we work.
- The children can see us working. They come and feel happy and proud because it's something fun and includes the whole family. All the young mums are there and everyone is working.
- We have jobs and we don't have to feel uncomfortable and not being told what to do and what not to do. You don't need all those college degrees and stuff. You get this job because of Aboriginal knowledge. You can just be an Aboriginal person and working with big mob of family.
- Working has been good and interesting. We need more people working, more young people and men.
- You come to work and then you got to go home, busy on both sides, always other things going on. There are lots of things going on for everyone. It's family stuff. Flexibility is good because people get time to deal with their stuff and know they have a job when they come back. But this is hard on the team sometimes. People need to tell us what is going on and communicate. Not just up and go.
- Having flexibility in the work helps people be engaged in working – parents, grandparents, men, women, young people. Unemployment for Aboriginal people is shocking. If you haven't ever worked before it's hard. It's about building up the skills and abilities and people's experience in working.
- Lots of people want to work. The word is out but people don't have the confidence and are not coming in [to Children's Ground]. We need to know what jobs we have and how we can get them in for the work. We can do this together with leadership.

## Training

- We are getting opportunities for life skills and changes.
- We get all our things sorted, licence, ochre card, birth certificate. We get help getting these things and we can work.
- We need to do some more formal training for leaders, that doesn't have to be whitefella way, it could be spending time with Elders – needs to be training for both ways.
- We need to get the young people onto the computers. They need to learn how to get the office skills to help with their work - it will help with their next job too. They need to have leadership in both worlds.

## Communication

- Children's Ground is a place where we come and be open to each other and talk about what's happening and what's not happening in good way, and how we work together and communicate. Sometimes we work it out together and sometimes we need to communicate more together.
- Families are working together and supporting each other. They are learning from each other. We are communicating and learning together.
- Sometimes we need to be talking more to each other, so we understand each other, not half way talk and then things we plan don't happen. We all need to understand what is going on. If we don't have the money to do that it needs to be communicated. We all need to understand why things are not happening sometimes.
- We need to keep talking to each other – sometimes staff are not communicating, not letting you know if they are going or not going to come.
- We need to share more from planning with others – those not always involved in governance and planning.
- It's fair. We can do anything. We come to work sometimes, and you might not get your way - you can't get everything. It's both ways - it's fair. Sometimes we have to change plans and always have to share it around.
- We are teaching non-First Nations staff too. They are learning from us. We are teaching them about our culture. We are teaching them our language too. They need to know about our language and culture so they can teach our children too.



*WHITE LINES: These are connecting everything and all of us. It is us standing strong with each other for our children. We are supporting each other. Our communities will strengthen for everyone. We surround the kids with everything they need - for their health, their spirit, their knowledge. We will do this for all kids, with families walking alongside them. We will continue learning and growing together forever.*

**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.**

- We focus on everything with people because it's all connected. Not just focusing on one part of people's lives - you have to focus on all parts. We are one individual. Culture, health, everything, all part of that one individual. It's like listening, learning, working with them to find solutions, and then doing it together.
- Lots of support for families - we see it all the time - Western staff always got open arms for us. But it's both ways. White people and Aboriginal people together and understanding each other. It's not like this in other places.
- People are asking for help - putting the shame aside. There is support and you just need to ask. Our way has always been that you don't judge weakness, you sit down with them and walk together - that is strong. Sharing knowledge makes you stronger. This leadership makes you confident.

- We are getting more people in health. Families are planning for their health. We can do more to engage people in health.
- We are getting lots of people out on country all the time. Now we have Children's Ground we have support to do these things. Before Children's Ground the little ones weren't in learning. Some did a bit of learning at preschool or childcare, but no family can be there and Elders aren't there. We didn't get out [on country] much before when we were younger. When we went out we had to leave half the family behind, but now we have the vehicles.
- We are helping all the children and families with things we didn't have in any other school or classroom. The children are doing healthy routines in learning. They are learning their identity and they are proud. They lose that at other schools - they need to learn this first to know how to be and to be strong.
- That colonisation makes things harder. We are going slow - growing slow and bringing people with us.







*'Families walking alongside their children' is one of the most important parts of Children's Ground. This painting shows us standing strong as a group. We are standing together. We all work together, different languages and dialects coming together. This is how we lead Children's Ground. This way our children will have had all those good experiences and learning, knowledge and skills. They will have choices and opportunities because they have grown up with language, culture, Elders and family – in both cultural and Western ways.*

**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 - we haven't got to some people yet, we need to keep working to get more children and families.**

- It's about all children - not just about one family's few children or grannies. We are telling everyone that it is all for children.
- The children are here with family. Young people, young mothers and men. All coming together for the children.
- It's the little ones that make it work, with the families, the staff and the community.

- That's why we have Children's Ground. So, all the families can be together and be strong. We can show the children our way from the start - that's our responsibly.
- Children are seeing families together and helping each other.
- The children are little role models too. When new children come to Children's Ground the little ones are showing them what to do and what they can play with.
- We need to be strong for those cheeky young people - get them more involved.
- People feel pride for the children coming to Children's Ground - this is where they should be.
- Before Children's Ground we didn't have the adults learning culture. Sometimes the adults don't know [some cultural knowledge] and then they are expected to know, and the children are expecting it. Some families are learning language and culture with the children and know more now. The children are learning more and more and fast.
- Children's Ground is the way we work well together. We have little jokes and stuff. When we have new children coming over it's good to see some other family, to show them where Children's Ground is and tell them about how Children's Ground is working.



*LITTLE HALF CIRCLES FACING OUT: These are the funders and partners of Children's Ground. They have their backs towards the centre to show that they are not controlling us but supporting us. The funding and support is coming into the community and we have a responsibility to them. We give back information about what is happening in our community, sharing who we are, showing the changes in learning, health and life of our children, families and communities.*

**Anwerne apwerte akngerre ineme awethe apwerte akngerre-irreme, Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe akngerre-irreme anwerne-kenhe apmere. Apwerte akngerre year arrpe-ane ante number akngerre-irreme. Anwerne-kenhe apwerte akweke-irreme sometimes nhenhe arne mpwaretyeke. Anwerne sometimes nhenhe plan mpwaretyeke-kenhe aneme.**

**The money is growing and Children's Ground is getting bigger - we have our own place now. The money has grown every year and the numbers have grown too. But sometimes we don't have enough money to do everything. We don't get to do everything we plan for.**



# Western analysis

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.

As the first implementation of a growth model, there have been expected and unexpected outcomes from the early delivery years that are important learnings internally and for broader systems.

The report has evidenced that by prioritising First Nations engagement and governance, privileging first language and culture and reducing access barriers, Children's Ground has made early progress in creating a responsive service system. This includes engaging a new cohort of children in early learning, engaging chronically unemployed people in work and engaging children and their families in regular preventative health promotion and support, including increased access to and engagement in local clinical health services.

In the face of extreme and complex intergenerational trauma, poverty, inequity and exclusion, there is evidence of increasing empowerment and control of First Nations people in the systems and services that affect them and are intended to support them.

This final analysis responds to the remaining two long-term evaluation questions.

## ***What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and any early progress towards impact?***

Research has identified the key service and systems design needed to close the gap in inequality and health and to redress complex disadvantage and inequity for First Nations people.<sup>149 150 151 152</sup> The following are recommended service features, all of which have been evidenced as inherent in the CG Approach:

- Community engagement
- Strong participatory processes that ensure First Nations people have agency in decision making - beyond consultation and part of all program development
- Processes and priorities that align with First Nations world views
- Building trust and relationships
- Collaborative leadership working with existing community governance structures, strengths and assets, rather than deficits
- Recognising power inequalities, deliberately sharing power and ensuring strong mutual accountability
- Sufficient time to allow for deep engagement and informed and empowered decision making
- Being flexible
- Engagement of First Nations people in monitoring and evaluation of agreed objectives

Furthermore, in a review of conceptual and empirical literature on place-based approaches to addressing the changing and complex needs of children and families, Moore et al. (2011)<sup>153</sup> identified key features of a comprehensive, community-based service framework:

- **Universal:** the provision of a core set of services to all families in all localities
- **Tiered:** additional supports to families and areas based on need and risks
- **Integrated:** integrated holistic support to families
- **Multi-level:** able to address all factors that directly or indirectly shape the development of young children and the functioning of their families
- **Place-based:** delivered in defined socio-geographic areas
- **Relational:** both at the individual and community level
- **Partnership-based:** between families and service providers, between different service providers, and between government and service providers
- **Governance structure:** government, non-government services and communities to collaborate

The evaluation demonstrated that the CG Approach provides a framework to implement these key features. The CG Approach has evidenced process effectiveness and early impact from incorporating these system features in design and delivery.

The CG Approach identifies five key system enablers (governance, services, workforce, investment and evaluation) to create the conditions for change. The impact of each of these is considered below.



149 Hunt J.. 2013. Engaging with Indigenous Australia—exploring the conditions for effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Issues paper no. 5. Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies

150 Jarvie, W., & Stewart, J.. 2011. Working with complexity: Community engagement and the Murdi Paaki COAG Trial 2002-2007 Australian Journal of Public Administration

151 Thorpe, A., Arabena, K., Sullivan, P., Silburn, K. & Rowley, K.. 2016, Engaging First Peoples: A Review of Government Engagement Methods for Developing Health Policy, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne

152 Moore, T. McDonald, M., McHugh-Dillon, H and West, S.. 2016. Community engagement A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families; The Australian Institute of Family Studies, CFCA Paper No. 39

153 Moore, T.G. and Fry, R. 2011. Place-based Services: A Literature Review. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health



## Local community governance

One of the most significant findings of this evaluation was the empowerment described by First Nations people through governance and decision making. The importance of cultural governance systems and the significant role of Elders were demonstrated as key drivers for engagement and change. This authority was critical in the development and implementation of culturally responsive and safe delivery and in children entering environments that reflected their cultures and languages. First Nations employment was both a driver and outcome of empowered design and delivery. This is a rare experience for First Nations people and children who have endured harmful structural racism and cultural exclusion in mainstream education, health and employment environments since colonisation<sup>154 155 156</sup> that have impacted people's trust and confidence in service systems.

First Nations people have built skills and long-standing strategies of resistance to minimise exposure to shame, disrespect, rejection and violence in order to survive disempowerment. This can include not engaging in Western systems. Therefore, Children's Ground aims to work through a model of empowerment across all elements of the CG Approach. However, empowerment is challenging to measure and there is the risk of evaluation findings being reductive. This evaluation found that the process of empowerment takes time and requires relationship development, cultural empowerment and creating safe environments.

As a human rights-based approach, establishing the conditions for trust and empowerment through the community-based and relational systems upturned the power relationships and placed Elders and First Nations people as the decision makers and leaders. This has been a key enabler to empowerment and is consistent with the findings from Kakadu West Arnhem.

Governance from the community was the single most important enabler of progress towards early impact. This evaluation demonstrates that in the implementation of the CG Approach, delivery and engagement moved in step with the pace of community. While the growth model meant that not all processes were implemented as intended, critical processes for, and experiences of, empowerment were established.

## Workforce

The lack of representation of First Nations people and high staff turnover and transience in services are reported to have a negative impact on health and education outcomes for children and families.<sup>157 158 159</sup> Local workforce is a key driver for change within the CG Approach. Due to a history of racism and exclusion from employment and education, change is expected to take a generation to fully realise. Over the longer term, the children engaging with Children's Ground today are expected to exit their educational experience with full agency in employment opportunities. In the short and medium-term, Children's Ground aims to increase the local First Nations workforce through reducing barriers to employment and increasing cultural workforce and Western-trained workforce opportunities.

Against key benchmarks from the Closing the Gap data, the evidence indicates that the Children's Ground Approach is having impact in areas in which Government, particularly in the Northern Territory, have found difficult to achieve. Achievements in increasing access to and engagement in early learning and employment are in contrast to downward trends in early learning and employment at a Territory level. Similar impact was evidenced in Children's Ground's Kakadu West Arnhem evaluation, confirming the ability of the Children's Ground Approach to impact key Closing the Gap targets.

Over time, employment stability increased, however, common barriers to employment for many First Nations people were all present amongst Children's Ground's First Nations workforce (poor health, disability, daily social and economic stress, trauma, sorry business and cultural responsibilities). These barriers are expected to continue for young people and adults who have already experienced profound personal stress, inequity and trauma.

Future evaluations will provide important evidence in relation to the mitigation of barriers and the sustainability of First Nations workforces in both the medium and long term.



154 Markwick, A., Ansari, Z., Clinch, D. et al. Experiences of racism among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults living in the Australian state of Victoria: a cross-sectional population-based study. BMC Public Health 19, 309 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6614-7>

155 Kairuz, C.A., Casanelia, L.M., Bennett-Brook, K. et al. Impact of racism and discrimination on the physical and mental health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia: a protocol for a scoping review. Syst Rev 9, 223 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01480-w>

156 Cave L, Shepherd C, Cooper MN, Zubrick SR. Prevalence of Racial Discrimination in a Cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children. Brisbane, QLD: ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course, 2018

157 Jongen, C., McCalman, J., Campbell, S. et al. Working well: strategies to strengthen the workforce of the Indigenous primary healthcare sector. BMC Health Serv Res 19, 910 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4750-5>

158 Zhao Y, Russell DJ, Guthridge S, et al Costs and effects of higher turnover of nurses and Aboriginal health practitioners and higher use of short-term nurses in remote Australian primary care services: an observational cohort study BMJ Open 2019;9:e023906. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023906

159 Hall, Lisa. (2012). The 'Come and Go' Syndrome of Teachers in Remote Indigenous Schools: Listening to the Perspective of Indigenous Teachers about What Helps Teachers to Stay and What Makes Them Go. The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education. 41. 10.1017/jie.2012.13.

## Integrated services

***“Action is needed on three fronts simultaneously: building more supportive communities, creating a better coordinated and more effective service system, and improving the interface between communities and services”<sup>160</sup>***

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. Multi-disciplinary teams were provided the flexibility and structure to work together to be responsive in their support of children and families. While staff identified challenges in achieving integration and the need for further policies, systems and practice development, the integrated delivery enabled responsiveness and early intervention with children and families.

The way in which children and families entered and engaged with the integrated service platform differed from family to family. Some families and children entered through learning, others through governance, some through community events and others through health and employment.

Flexibility enabled the team to operate from the perspective of equity rather than equality alone, and towards outcomes, not outputs only. This meant staff members were able to engage with each child and family in a way, in a place and at a pace that worked for them and to focus on multiple presenting concerns, rather than a single issue.

## Collective investment

In Australia, sector funding continues to be driven by governments rather than being ‘child, family and community’ centred. Funding for children and families occurs primarily through discrete program and policy areas defined by governments (e.g., health, education, employment, child protection etc). The ability to integrate funding across complex social, cultural and economic needs is difficult to achieve and requires resources beyond those available for most communities. This means that needs are too often poorly met and service design is not purpose fit.

Children’s Ground’s collective investment model is designed to achieve funding at scale for whole communities over a 25-year period. Collective investment is the least visible of Children’s Ground systems reform agenda, however, it is arguably one of the most important enabling conditions for service and practice change. It allows for a single funding stream going into community, which enables the CG Approach to be owned and controlled by communities.



Funding comes from a range of philanthropic, government and corporate partners. The combination has allowed for innovation, cultural design, increasing scale, flexible integrated delivery and targeted investment in prevention, employment support and other key areas to reduce common access barriers.

Children’s Ground did not achieve the scale of investment required for implementation of the full Approach over the period. The ability to mobilise funds at scale for place-based investment continues to be challenging. The CG Approach has established income targets for investment to achieve scale across each of its integrated services areas. Not achieving funding at scale for the full Approach may have implications for long term impact.

## Evaluation

Evaluation as an enabler towards systems change has three components for Children’s Ground. Firstly, building a robust evidence base over time for practice and impact. Secondly, it aims to establish First Nations engagement in research and evaluation systems that generate evidence from a First Nations perspective. Thirdly, to establish data and evidence-based feedback into practice to monitor progress, inform delivery and ensure that First Nations data is accessible and owned by those it is collected about.

Building evaluation literacy is considered an important process and enabler of empowerment. This evaluation has demonstrated extensive engagement of First Nations people in monitoring and evaluation over the period. First Nations people owning and controlling research and data in relation to their communities is established by the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research<sup>161</sup>. The AIATSIS framework is structured around four principles and is complemented by standards from the NHMRC that state:

***“Ethical research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities should<sup>162</sup>: ...develop and/or strengthen research capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their communities [and] enhance their rights as researchers, research partners, collaborators and participants in research.”***

<sup>160</sup> Moore, T.G. and Fry, R. 2011. Place-based Services: A Literature Review. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health

<sup>161</sup> AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. 2020. AIATSIS

<sup>162</sup> National Health and Medical Research Council. 2018. Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra





Children's Ground's evaluation framework aligns with these principles and standards of best practice.

This evaluation has found that embedding evaluation as part of the core design of the CG Approach has been instrumental in empowering and developing local community skills, knowledge and literacy in evaluation and research.

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation has demonstrated standards and a clear shared focus across the organisation in relation to long and short-term outcomes. Rather than staff focussing on short term outputs connected to discretely funded projects, all staff are working towards and collecting data in relation to long term outcomes. This has complemented and supported an integrated working environment.

Monitoring progress against the CG Approach and key progress indicators as well as monitoring of quality and standards has been established as part of the operational delivery during the period. Data is used to inform service delivery and design, operational priorities and progress against benchmarks. Improvements are still needed in systems and resourcing to ensure standards and practices are fully embedded and efficient.

### ***What contribution has been made towards broader Systems reform?***

Despite billions of dollars and decades of public policy efforts, many First Nations children continue to be born into families and communities experiencing poverty and social disadvantage, often stemming from intergenerational injustice, trauma, a lack of agency, choice and voice, systemic racism and social and economic exclusion - all of which negatively impact their health and wellbeing - and all of which are preventable for future generations.

Nationally, major inquiries and reviews over several decades have presented and re-presented the statistics, human realities, and reasons, both historical and current, for the profound inequity of First Nations people in Australia. From these, a consistent set of recommendations continues to emerge, recognising that the status quo is failing First Nations children and families.

Research and recommendations in relation to barriers for systems and service reform have been presented throughout this evaluation. Children's Ground's evaluation has found that the CG Approach is a comprehensive service system which includes all key design features recommended widely in research across health, early childhood, education, employment, complex disadvantage, mental health and evaluation. This evaluation has also evidenced that, where it is operational, the CG Approach design has reduced barriers and created engagement of children and families at unprecedented levels.

This evaluation has evidenced that it is critical to invest resources and time in processes that create the space for genuine First Nations empowerment and control in decision-making. This can create systems and practices that privilege First Nations language and culture, and through this, key national outcomes sought by Closing the Gap can be achieved.

As a baseline and early progress report, the data and evidence demonstrates that all core elements of the CG Approach (principles, integrated services and systems reform) work together to provide a comprehensive model to achieve sustained changes in outcomes for children and families who experience complex disadvantage. The findings show that reform in one area of systems, services or practice alone is not enough. Irrespective of the growth model, this evaluation has demonstrated that the systemic conditions and authorising environments required for change are interconnected and are stimulated by reform in other areas. This is consistent with findings from national and international research<sup>163</sup>. This is also consistent with findings from the evaluation of the full CG Approach in Kakadu<sup>164</sup>. Early stage impact analysis indicates the long term foundations for improved outcomes for children, families and community level population change.



<sup>163</sup> Centre for Community Child Health & The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. 2011. Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project

<sup>164</sup> Lorains, J. and Vadiveloo, J. 2019. Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem Final Evaluation - 2013 to 2017.

# Conclusions

*"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



## Arrernte conclusions

If Children's Ground didn't have people like us there wouldn't be any Children's Ground.

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.

The dedication and passion of staff, and the belief they have in Children's Ground working. The worries we have with other services. We have all seen how Children's Ground works and everyone here believes that this is going to be the change we want to see for our children and grandchildren.

## Western conclusions

Amongst the landscape of annual Closing the Gap reports that continue to show minimal progress, the achievements of the CG Approach provide a positive contrast to the national picture.

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 CG Approach has the potential to reform systems. The evaluation shows that the core processes of the CG Approach can be adapted to diverse contexts and achieve early change and impact for children and families. This Central Australian evaluation validates the finding in Kakadu - that the impact of the CG Approach is based on 'how' operations are delivered, not just 'what' is delivered. The CG Approach provides a set of principles, standards and services that can be tailored by communities to create the systemic conditions for change. This has been evidenced in two diverse locations.

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. However, this is not in isolation from integrated wrap around services, supports and opportunities, which were interconnected and complementary enablers across the system, service platform and delivery. The collective investment model enables both integrity to delivery and the processes of empowerment.

At a time where suicide rates, incarceration rates and child protection rates for First Nations children, young people and families are at epidemic levels, Children's Ground has been a safe place for people to engage with and experience wellbeing, empowerment and cultural safety. This in turn has resulted in significant and important early stage progress towards long term change. Building upon the talent and strength of children and communities creates a new lived experience and challenges the domination of trauma, grief and deficit models.

Children's Ground's strategy and theory is that long term outcomes can only be achieved and sustained when there is integrity in implementation of the CG Approach.

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. Lack of adequate 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 stage progress.

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



# Appendices

## Appendix 1: The CG Approach - What and How services are delivered

### Integrated Service Platform

The CG Approach integrates First Nations knowledge with leading practice in global knowledge systems.

*Arne ingkerrenyeke anyentelhe iletyeke:tyerretye ngwenhe mwerre anetyeke, akaltye irremele, tyerrtye ngwenge artweye mapenge.*

*Connect everything – education, health, culture, identity, economic wellbeing. They are all connected, in the way that Aboriginal law and society is connected.*

*Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme*

In communities, the CG Approach delivers the following services and supports, referred to as the integrated 'Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform' (LWD platform) – See Figure 15.

The LWD platform is a full system of services and wrap around, responsive support that are the requisite foundations of prevention and empowerment. To respond to the multi-level influences on children's development and life from pre-birth to 25 years, the CG Approach is delivered with genuine integration; it is not hindered by siloed funding streams and delivery. Content and delivery are tailored for each child, family and community to ensure children are equipped to enter adulthood confident and economically independent in local and global environments.

**Figure 15: Children's Ground Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform**



What services are delivered is important, however, how they are delivered is what can lead to engagement, empowerment and sustained change and impact. This is achieved through a clear focus on the Children's Ground principles.

## Principles

The principles outlined in Figure 9 ensure the CG Approach puts children at the centre and is led by community. They establish the CG Approach as high-quality, strengths-based, place-based, integrated, intergenerational, inclusive, long-term and responsive.

Long term success is premised on the full CG Approach being implemented. This can be implemented through a primary delivering organisation/body or through partnership delivery.

## Enabling systemic conditions – systems reform

Children's Ground grew out of decades of work with and by First Nations people, leading to an understanding of the key drivers that prevent change and those that enable change. How the CG Approach addresses these drivers and creates the conditions for change is depicted in Figure 16.

**Figure 16: Children's Ground systems reform**

	Current System	Children's Ground
<b>1. Governance</b>	Top down	Bottom up
<b>2. Service Delivery</b>	Crisis response and delivered in silos	Preventative and integrated
<b>3. Workforce</b>	Short-term; outsiders	Long-term; local
<b>4. Investment</b>	Short-term, project based	Long-term, collective, at scale
<b>5. Evidence</b>	Outputs based (what and how many)	Outcomes based (impact) First Nations led

A dual governance system ensures that corporate governance is balanced with local First Nations governance. Day to day decision making is in the hands of community through **community cultural governance** led by Elders. This is supported by **Western governance** Board of Directors that brings together corporate, financial, not for profit, legal, cultural, health and education expertise.

A high quality and responsive **workforce** that combines cultural and Western expertise in each area of delivery is engaged in location. **Local employment** of local talent is a centrepiece. Recognising barriers to employment faced by First Nations people, this is enabled through a unique, flexible 'no barriers' approach to **employment and workforce**. A long-term strategy is for the new generation to be the economically independent workforce in the region for the future.

**Collective investment** combines philanthropic funding with government funding to enable scale, excellence, innovation and flexibility to deliver change. Innovative funding partners are committed to funding long-term outcomes rather than short-term outputs alone.

Monitoring and evaluation with robust data collection informs performance quality and development. A longitudinal evaluation is oversighted by a national Research Advisory Group and is co-designed and led by First Nations people on the ground. This builds the **evidence** and evaluates the impact of the CG Approach.





## Appendix 2: Evaluation Framework and short and medium-term progress indicators

To create an environment with families and communities that realises their aspirations for the next generation of children - to be free from trauma and suffering, to enjoy equity and safety and be able to grow into adulthood happy and healthy, with agency over their social, cultural, political and economic future.

	Children and young people			
	<b>Aspirations</b>			
	Children are thriving-engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities			
	<b>Headline indicator</b>			
	Families are walking alongside their children			
	<b>High level outcomes</b>			
Progress measures	Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures	Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning & are creative problem solvers	Children are healthy	Children are happy
	Children have increased access to and engagement in First Cultural early years learning	Children have increased access to and engagement in high quality early years learning	Children have increased access to health promotion	Children have increased access to social and emotional wellbeing and literacy
Access & Engagement YEAR 1-3	A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early years learning No. of children (3-5 years) engaging in early years learning (progressing towards Universal Access)		No. of children engaged in health promotion	No. of children engaged in SEWB
	% of children engaged First Cultural learning	% of children engaged in primary school learning	A critical mass (75%) of children engaged with health promotion (how often and what)	A critical mass (75%) of children and young people engaged with SEWB (how often and what)
OUTCOME INDICATORS: YEAR 4-6	Increase frequency of child attendance in early learning (Cultural and Western) % of children engaging in early years learning at Universal Access levels (600 hours a year) % of children engaging in engaging in full time hours of primary school age learning		Decreased rates and types of morbidity for children and young people	Young people report improved SEWB

Family		Community		
<b>Aspirations</b>		<b>Aspirations</b>		
Families feel confident about their children's wellbeing and future. They feel involved and empowered in their children's learning, wellbeing and development and their own ability to create environments of safety		Communities enjoy economic, cultural and social strength and opportunity. Local Governance is strong and inclusive. People care for each other and provide a safe environment for every child		
<b>Headline indicator</b>		<b>Headline indicator</b>		
Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development		The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing		
Families are socially and economically strong		The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity		
Communities are safe and inclusive		Communities are safe and inclusive		
Progress measures	Family	Community	Community	Community
Access & Engagement YEAR 1-3	Family	Community	Community	Community
OUTCOME INDICATORS: YEAR 4-6	Family	Community	Community	Community
	No. of children have families participating alongside them in learning, health and development	Families have increased access to health promotion and support Families have increased economic opportunities and support	First Nations governance is established, inclusive and active (No. people & meetings) Community engages in cultural teaching and learning	Community has access to cultural and physically safe intergenerational environments Community enjoys social and cultural events, activities and celebrations
	No. of families involved in their community alongside their children	No. of families engaged in health promotion and economic opportunities	Community reports improvement in empowerment Community engaged in economic opportunities	Community reports improved cultural and physical safety Prevalence of social stress
	% of families participating in learning, health and development alongside their children	% of families and households with children where at least one adult is employed	% of community reporting strong First Nations governance % of community reporting strong cultural knowledge and wellbeing in their community	Community has high quality intergenerational environments and resources for a range of cultural, social and economic activities where they live
	% of families involved in their community alongside their children	% of families engaged in health promotion & social/emotional wellbeing Decreased rates and types of morbidity for adults	% of community reporting improvement in empowerment Governance is inclusive and active (No. of people involved and No. of meetings)	% of community reporting improved culturally and physically safe Prevalence of social stress experienced by community



OUTCOME INDICATORS >7 YEARS	Children and young people			
	% of children achieving cultural knowledge appropriate for their age (assessed by cultural educators)	% of children at or above literacy and numeracy benchmarks appropriate for ESL speakers	Rates and types of morbidity for children (i.e. ears, anaemia, low birthweight, etc)	Children and young people reporting positive SEWB and identity
	% of children achieving standards for literacy & numeracy in first language	% of children developmentally vulnerable on one/two or more AEDC domains	% of children 'on-track' on the AEDC physical health and wellbeing domain	% of children 'on-track' on the AEDC emotional maturity and social competence domains
	% of young people reporting positive connection to their culture and positive self-identity	Rate of attainment of Yr. 12 or equiv. AQF Cert II or above	Reduced child hospital rates for preventable illnesses and injury	Decreased prevalence of suicide and mental health concerns for young people



Family		Community		
% of families participating in learning (early/primary) alongside their children % of families teaching children their culture and knowledge systems	% of families and households with children where at least one adult is employed % of families receiving unemployment benefits	% of community reporting strong cultural governance, knowledge and wellbeing in their community	Increased rates of employment for people aged 17 and above within the community and types of employment	Community reports quality cultural and social and economic activity where they live
% of families who report setting goals and supporting their child's learning, health and wellbeing	% of families engaged with child protection and justice agencies	% of community members engaged in local governance and decision making	Rates of Aboriginal people aged 18-24 years participating in education, training or employment	% of families confident in the safety of their children % of young people reporting feeling safe and engaged in their community
% of families who report easy and timely access to health and wellbeing services their children need	Reduced rates and types of morbidity for adults - health and mental health % of families reporting positive connection to their culture	% of community members reporting local governance is empowering, based on customary governance and inclusive	% of community members reporting they are economically secure	% of community reporting safety, inclusiveness and diversity in the community





## Appendix 3: Data definitions, challenges and limitations



**Data by age and age groups:** when data is presented across all years of the reporting period, each person's age is calculated as at 30 June in the first year they engaged.

Throughout the report, data is presented by the following age groups:

- 0-8 years (early childhood) for learning and health data, with learning data split by 0-5 years and 6-8 years for formal learning data (Children's Ground does not yet provide primary school learning)
- 0-1 year, 2-3 years and 0-5 years for maternal and child health
- 9-17 years represents young people
- 18+ years represents adults

Data is also presented throughout the report by other age groups for children and young people based on the intended focus age group for elements of the CG Approach.

**Internal participation data:** Participation data is subject to change slightly and should be considered relatively conservative. Additional people engaged with the CG Approach (i.e. in large family/community events) and insufficient demographic data was collected with them (age, community) so they were not able to be included in participation data. When adequate demographic data is captured about these individuals they are included in participation data from their first point of engagement. Subsequently, in future analysis, this will increase the number of people engaged in the CG Approach from 2017-19.

**Internal survey data:** not all participants responded to all questions. The per cent of respondents is based on those who did respond to each question.

**Evaluation interviews and online questionnaires:** at times the denominator varies between questions based on the number of families and staff who were asked and answered questions. Staff, families and local services who ticked 'N/A' or did not answer questions were removed from the denominator.

**Local service survey data:** the diversity in service and partnership types and resource limitations made it challenging to capture the breadth of collective voices from all the organisations Children's Ground has worked with - particularly capturing enough local services' perspectives to enable quantitative data analysis in respect to each unique type and aim of partnerships and collaborations. This data should be read with caution.

**External administrative data:** given the small geographic areas in which Children's Ground works, external administrative data is not available by location. There are understandable limitations of data for small geographic areas. However, it raises a significant system issue in terms of easy access to data sets for community level monitoring and evaluation.

In terms of broader population data, there were restrictions in accessing external administrative data sets. Children's Ground has been denied access to key health, education and justice data sets by the Northern Territory Government and contracted providers, despite having access to the same sets of data in previous Children's Ground evaluations with other communities.

Children's Ground will continue to seek access to relevant administrative data sets and to identify key gaps in public or government administrative data critical to understanding local community realities.

### **Northern Territory Government (NTG) administrative data:**

- **Department of Education:** received enrolment, attendance and NAPLAN data. Denied access to Families as First Teachers (FaFT) and Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. Citing that AEDC data numbers were too small for Local Community level data by Indigenous status. No rationale was provided for denying access to FaFT data.
- **Northern Territory Department of Health/Central Australia Aboriginal Congress:** denied access to Aboriginal Health Key Performance Indicator data (AHKPI). Citing that AHKPI data cannot be used for evaluation purposes.
- **Department of Police, Fire and Emergency:** denied access to data relating to crimes against property and persons. Citing that their data and statistics team are too under-resourced to respond to data applications.

## Appendix 4: Regional baseline data against key indicators

Children's Ground's long-term outcomes each have short and medium-term progress indicators that monitor and measure progress over time. This section presents a baseline picture drawing on internal and publicly available external data against each indicator. Short-term progress indicators focus on establishing access to and engagement in services, supports and opportunities for children and their families. The external data will not be used for the purposes of evaluation. This aims to demonstrate a baseline data snapshot against the key short and medium-term community level indicators Children's Ground seeks to change over the long-term. This baseline data snapshot will continue to be populated when or if Children's Ground is successful in their ongoing applications for data to key Northern Territory Government Departments.

*Note: The external publicly available data is inconsistent across years and geographic boundaries.*

Progress indicators	External publicly available data	
Cultural and Western English literacy and numeracy learning		
Children engaging in early years learning	Average (%) of Indigenous children enrolled in early years in government schools <sup>165</sup> 2016. Alice Springs NTG region	69.4% <i>(Sample: 1,211)</i>
	Average % preschool attendance <sup>166</sup> 2015. Alice Springs government schools (full year)	77% <i>(Sample: 2,207)</i>
	Only 32% of Indigenous students attending school four days or more per week across 2019-20 <sup>167</sup> . Northern Territory <i>(No sample provided)</i>	
Children engaged First Cultural learning	DATA GAP	
Children engaging in early years learning at Universal Access levels (600 hours a year)	Proportion of Indigenous children attending 600 hours per year (Universal Access) <sup>168</sup> 2015. Northern Territory DATA GAP Central Australia	72% <i>(No sample provided)</i>
A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early years learning	See above: Average (%) of Indigenous children enrolled in early years in government schools	
Children engaging in full time hours of primary school age learning	Average % primary school attendance <sup>169</sup> 2015. Alice Springs government schools (full year)	80% <i>(No sample provided)</i>
Children achieving cultural knowledge appropriate for their age (assessed by cultural educators)	DATA GAP	
Children achieving standards for literacy & numeracy in first language (assessed by cultural educators)	DATA GAP	
Children developmentally vulnerable (DV) on one/two or more AEDC domains	Proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on 1 & 2 or more domains <sup>170</sup> 2015. Alice Springs excluding Town Camps	41.9% (DV1) <i>(Sample: 117)</i> 28.2% (DV2) <i>(Sample: 117)</i>
Children at or above literacy and numeracy benchmarks appropriate for ESL speakers	% of children at or above national minimum standards <sup>171</sup> Denominator = test population 2015. Alice Springs government schools ESL not available – DATA GAP	YEAR 3 Reading = 38% Writing = 60% Numeracy = 50% <i>(Sample: 104)</i>
		YEAR 5 Reading = 44% Writing = 39% Numeracy = 54% <i>(Sample: 94)</i>
Secondary school participation	Aboriginal people (20 to 24 years) achieved Year 12 or equivalent. 2016. Alice Springs Town Camps <sup>172</sup>	12.5% <i>(Sample: 64)</i>
% of young people reporting positive connection to their culture and positive self-identity	DATA GAP	

165 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2016 enrolment and attendance statistics

166 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2015 Attendance data by government school in Alice Springs

167 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. Annual Report 2019-2020

168 National Report: National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education – 2015. Australian Government

169 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2015 Attendance data by government school in Alice Springs

170 AEDC. PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. March 2017 release

171 Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2015 NAPLAN data by government school in Alice Springs

172 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. February 2019 release



Progress indicators	External publicly available data	
Children are healthy and happy		
Children engaged with health promotion (how often and what)	DATA GAP	
Children and young people engaged with SEWB (how often and what)	DATA GAP	
Child hospital admissions (0-14 years)	Admissions for injury, poisoning and other external causes, Aboriginal persons aged 0 to 14 years <sup>173</sup> 2012-13. Alice Springs town and Town Camps combined. Distinguishable data not available. <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	124 children. ASR per 100,000 = 5,913
	Admissions for respiratory system diseases, Aboriginal persons aged 0 to 14 years <sup>174</sup> 2012-13. Alice Springs town and Town Camps combined. Disaggregated data not available. <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	201 children. ASR per 100,000 = 9,913
	Total admissions, Aboriginal persons aged 0 to 14 years <sup>175</sup> 2012-13. Alice Springs town and Town Camps combined. Distinguishable data not available. <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	972 children. ASR per 100,000 = 47,323
Prevalence of suicide and mental health concerns for young people	Number and rate of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples who died by suicide <sup>176</sup> 2015. Australian data <b>DATA GAP Central Australia</b>	152 died by suicide 25.5 deaths per 100,000 persons Rate = 5.2%
Rates and types of health morbidity for children and young people	Proportion (%) of babies with low birthweight (defined as less than 2,500g) <sup>177</sup> 2016-18. Alice Springs Town Camps	14.1% (Sample: 88)
	Proportion of infants and children (aged 6 months to less than 5 years) reported as anaemic <sup>178</sup> 2014. Northern Territory <b>DATA GAP Central Australia</b>	22% (No sample provided)
	Infant Death Rate per 1000 live births <sup>179</sup> 2011-15. Alice Springs town	7.0 (No sample provided)
	% Aboriginal children fully immunised at 1, 2 & 5 years <sup>180</sup> 2015. Alice Springs Town Camps	1yo = 94.7% (Sample: 71) 2yo = 82.1% (Sample: 68) 5yo = 90.5% (Sample: 72)
	% Children developmentally vulnerable in physical domain <sup>181</sup> 2015. Alice Springs excluding Town Camps <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	23.1% (Sample: 117)
% of children ‘on-track’ on the AEDC Physical health and wellbeing domain	% Children developmentally vulnerable in physical domain <sup>182</sup> 2015. Alice Springs excluding Town Camps <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	Social = 12.8% (Sample: 117) Emotional = 15.4% (Sample: 117)
Children and young people reporting positive SEWB and identity	DATA GAP	
Families and households with children where at least one adult is employed	% children (<15 years) in Aboriginal jobless families <sup>183</sup> 2016. Alice Springs Town Camps	66.5% (Sample: 251)

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

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

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

176 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 3303.0 - Causes of Death, Australia, 2015

177 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

178 NT AHKPI Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

179 Child Friendly Alice Technical report 1 and Public Health Information Development Unit, 2019

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

181 AEDC. PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. March 2017 release

182 AEDC. PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. March 2017 release

183 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

Progress indicators	External publicly available data	
Children engaged with child protection	Proportion of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care <sup>184</sup> 2015-16. Northern Territory <b>DATA GAP Central Australia</b>	89% of children in care are Aboriginal (No sample provided = 1,020 children in care)
Families report easy and timely access to health and wellbeing services their children need	DATA GAP	
Family engagement, wellbeing and strength		
Children have families participating in learning, health and development alongside them	DATA GAP	
Families involved in their community alongside their children	DATA GAP	
Families participating in early learning and primary school, alongside their children	DATA GAP	
Families teaching children their culture and knowledge systems	DATA GAP	
Families engaged in health promotion and support	Proportion of Aboriginal residents aged 15 to 54 years who had an adult health check by health district <sup>185</sup> 2014. Alice Springs Health District	54% (No sample provided)
Rates and types of morbidity for adults – health and mental health	Proportion of Aboriginal residents aged ≥15 years with type 2 diabetes <sup>186</sup> 2014. Alice Springs Health District	67% (No sample provided)
	Proportion of Aboriginal residents with a diagnosis of rheumatic heart disease / acute rheumatic fever <sup>187</sup> 2013-14. Alice Springs Health District	35% (No sample provided)
	Admissions for injury, poisoning and other external causes, Aboriginal persons aged 15 years and over <sup>188</sup> 2012-13. Alice Springs town and Town Camps combined. Distinguishable data not available. <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	950 people. ASR per 100,000 = 21,489
	Admissions for mental health related conditions, Aboriginal persons aged 15 years and over <sup>189</sup> 2012-13. Alice Springs town and Town Camps combined. Distinguishable data not available. <b>DATA GAP Alice Springs Town Camps</b>	447 people. ASR per 100,000 = 10,114
	% Aboriginal women smoking during pregnancy <sup>190</sup> 2016-18. Alice Springs Town Camps	42.6% (Sample: 80)
	Proportion of people unemployed <sup>191</sup> 2016. Alice Springs Town Camps	41.1% (Sample: 90)
Families and young people engaged in employment	Indigenous 15 to 19 year olds engaged in school, work or further ed/training <sup>192</sup> 2016. Alice Springs Town Camps	25% (Sample 128)
Families receiving unemployment benefits	% Indigenous Australians aged 18-64 receiving unemployment or parenting payments <sup>193</sup> June 2018. Australian data <b>DATA GAP Central Australia</b>	31.1% (No sample provided)
Families reporting positive connection to their culture	DATA GAP	
Families report setting goals and supporting their child’s learning, health and wellbeing	DATA GAP	

184 Northern Territory Government Department of Territory Families 2015-16 Annual Report

185 NT AHKPI Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

186 NT AHKPI Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

187 NT AHKPI Public Release Report, 2014. Department of Health, Darwin, 2016

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

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

190 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

191 PHIDU ATSI Social Health Atlas of Australia. Published 2021

192 PHIDU ATSI Supplementary indicator - learning or earning. Closing the Gap Time Series Atlas, data by Indigenous area, July 2021 Release And Social Atlas of Australia. Published 2016

193 AIHW. 2019. Unemployment and parenting income support payments



Appendix 5: WTA baseline Community Profiles

The following provides a baseline profile for each community. Profile information was reported by families throughout the 2016 WTA phase. The following provides a profile for each community from the 2016 Walk, Talk & Act phase.

		
	Irrkerlantye	Mpweringke Anapipe
Language	<p><b>Central and Eastern Arrernte</b> is used by most residents.</p> <p><i>Arrernte Professors and Arrernte linguists identified that the Arrernte language was not being used or spoken properly and that the significant knowledge and language held by previous generations was not being transferred across to new generations. This results in first language deterioration and poor standards in verbal use across generations.</i></p>	<p><b>Central and Eastern Arrernte</b> are the main languages spoken by residents.</p>
Geography & location	<p><b>Traditional Owners of Mparntwe (Alice Springs).</b> Irrkerlantye lies on the Eastern boundary of Mparntwe, three kilometres from the centre of town.</p> <p>Families have lived here permanently for over 40 years and struggle due to a lack of essential services including power and water and appalling housing infrastructure (tin sheds only). Some families now live in public housing or other Town Camps or are homeless. Establishing permanent housing and returning families to their traditional lands was central to to their family's 25-year vision for the next generation.</p>	<p><b>Eight homelands across Mpweringke and Anapipe country, between 60 and 100Km from Alice Springs.</b></p> <p>Some people live on their homelands permanently, while others live in public housing in Alice Springs due to health issues and the need for regular access to education, employment and other services.</p> <p>Engagement occurred with families from five outstations with three outstations identified for primary engagement and a further two within operational delivery.</p>
Governance	<p><b>Governed by Traditional Owners and residents.</b></p> <p>The Town Camp has a Housing Association Committee. Irrkerlantye has no tenure nor leasing agreement as it currently sits upon crown land.</p> <p><i>Traditional governance structures have been severely impacted by colonisation. At Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, adhering to a First Nations approach to governance was met with enthusiasm and has been at the centre of all work.</i></p>	<p><b>Governed by Traditional Owners</b></p> <p>Each homeland is governed by the families of that homeland.</p>
Learning & Wellbeing	<p><b>Preschool, childcare and playgroups based in Alice Springs.</b></p> <p>No children actively engaged in early learning.</p> <p><i>There were only two early learning services available in any of the four Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe locations; these were delivering one two-hour session per week per site. There were no early childhood services delivered through children's first language and culture within the Alice Springs region.</i></p> <p><i>In early 2017, an Aboriginal-run early years learning centre was established in Alice Springs township. The service framework is based on the Abecedarian 3a approach. Open to all Aboriginal families, transport was offered to families in Children's Ground communities of Irrkerlantye, Yarrenyty Arltere and Uyenpere Atwatye.</i></p>	<p><b>No access to any early childhood services on homelands where they live.</b></p> <p>No children actively engaged in early learning.</p>
Language & cultural transmission	<p><i>Elders and leaders of Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme identified early the priority and focus on cultural learning for the next generation of children. This was key to Elders who had expressed concern regarding the integrity of language and the deterioration of cultural knowledge and practice within the community.</i></p> <p><i>For over 30 years Arrernte educators have worked and advocated for the inclusion of culturally based learning in first language, with the 'Intelyapelyape curriculum' written in 1995. This continues to be excluded from mainstream education.</i></p>	

	
Yarrenyty Arltere	Uyenpere Atwatye <sup>194</sup>
<p>Many residents speak <b>Western Arrernte</b>; there are at least eight other languages spoken by residents.</p> <p><i>They also noted poor use of English and rather a "mix mix" language being used. The benchmark outcome, was set as being proficient in both languages and the requirement for children to achieve full written literacy in both their first language/s and English.</i></p>	<p>Many residents speak <b>Central and Eastern Arrernte and Warlpiri</b>; there are many other languages spoken by residents.</p>
<p><b>A Town Camp within Alice Springs.</b> Includes residents who have lived here for over 40 years but who are not all living on their traditional lands.</p>	<p><b>A Town Camp within Alice Springs.</b> Originally established for Central and Eastern Arrernte people.</p> <p>Residents include people living on their traditional lands, other Central and Eastern Arrernte residents whose traditional lands are elsewhere and Warlpiri people (a separate Nation) not living on their traditional lands.</p>
<p><b>The Town Camp has a Housing Association Committee.</b></p> <p>Governance for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe at a community level consists of Elders and residents. Some are key members of the Housing Association Committee. Traditional Owners for this country do not live in the Town Camp but are part of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe governance.</p>	<p><b>The Town Camp has a Housing Association Committee.</b></p> <p>Governance for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe at a community level consists of Elders and residents. Some are key members of the Housing Association Committee. Some Traditional Owners for this country live in the Town Camp and some do not but are part of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe governance.</p>
<p><b>A weekly single session playgroup visiting in community one day per week.</b></p> <p>Preschool, childcare and playgroups based in Alice Springs.</p> <p>No children actively engaged in early learning in town-based services.</p> <p><i>With a significant majority of children not actively engaged in early childhood education, phase one of Children's Ground delivery focused on establishing early learning in communities with a focus on first language and culture as priority.</i></p> <p><i>Arrernte leaders reflected on their thirty-year history in trying to establish Arrernte curriculum and education within the mainstream education system. Leaders clearly articulated their priority to teach their children through language and culture. Another key priority was the engagement of families alongside children in their learning and development.</i></p>	<p><b>A weekly single session playgroup. Majority of sessions run within house yards.</b></p> <p>Preschool, childcare and playgroups based in Alice Springs.</p> <p>Small number of children engaged in early learning in town-based services.</p>
<p><i>Alice Springs is the service centre for a million square kilometres and many Nations are now represented among its residents. It is part of the Arrernte Nation. Colonisation began in the 1860's with the establishment of the overland telegraph line between Adelaide and Darwin. Colonisation, forced removal off their lands and stolen generations has had a significant impact on Arrernte people and their ability to maintain their cultural connection to their traditional lands and practices.</i></p>	

194 Note: After being the initial site for Walk, Talk & Act in 2012, in 2017 Uyenpere Atwatye Walk, Talk & Act was attempted, however with very stretched capacity it was not undertaken properly until mid-2019.

			
Irrkerlantye		Mpweringke Anapipe	
School access & engagement	<b>Access to local primary and secondary schools.</b> Families reported issues with consistent engagement in school.		<b>Access to one school in Alice Springs via a local school bus service.</b> Families reported issues with consistent engagement in school.
	<i>A baseline of children's school engagement and attendance was not undertaken, however, Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme identified serious concerns with children's school attendance and Western education outcomes. Families reported very few children engaged in high school. Informal evidence of 'school shopping' was also clear with children moving from one school to another quite fluidly, as engagement dropped or issues within the school or with other children were noticed by a family.</i>		
Clinical health access	Access to local Aboriginal health, Government health and hospital services.		Occasional outreach health services on homelands.
Economic wellbeing	No in-community, place-based employment opportunities.		Some individuals connected to these homelands live and work in Alice Springs. Employment available through CDEP <sup>195</sup> . No other current employment in community. Some previous employment through former Mpweringke Outstation Resource Centre.
	<i>Significant widespread unemployment and underemployment reported. Many families live under the poverty line and/or live with Centrelink support or no income.</i>		
Community development & infrastructure	This is the home of some of the key Traditional Owners for Alice Springs. Families continue to live in tin sheds, with no secure water or power and no tenure. Due to Government actions, many were forced out after the 2007 Federal Government Intervention however families continue to work towards permanent living facilities on site. This has been a request for over forty years.		Housing has been established and continues to be developed slowly. Infrastructure for living includes houses and tin sheds. There are no educational, health or shop facilities in the homelands area. Facilities include shade shelters and playground facilities, ovals or basketball courts in some places.
Service coordination opportunities	<i>Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation (Town Camp social service provider). Akeyulerre Incorporated (Arrernte traditional cultural health and healing centre). Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Aboriginal controlled health service). The Ingkerreke Outstation Resource centre.</i>		

	
Yarrenyty Arltere	Uyenpere Atwatye
<b>Access to local primary and secondary schools.</b> Families reported issues with consistent engagement in school.	<b>Access to local primary and secondary schools.</b> Families reported issues with consistent engagement in school.
<i>Elders and leaders expressed generalised concerns for the wellbeing of young people. The common experience for families was young people of schooling age experiencing high levels of schooling disengagement, unemployment, substance misuse and few life opportunities.</i> <i>One of their aspirations was the next generation of children engaging and being successful in their education, including both Western and cultural knowledge and skills.</i>	
Access to local Aboriginal health, Government health and hospital services.	Access to local Aboriginal health, Government health and hospital services.
Some limited employment options, mostly through CDEP. Some small enterprise opportunities.	Some limited employment options, mostly through CDEP. Some small enterprise opportunities.
<i>Many people are not accessing Centrelink at all due to punitive reporting measures. Some families, while there is unemployment, may only have one person on Centrelink.</i>	
One of the oldest and largest Town Camps in Alice Springs. Has a community centre that offers programs and support. Outside of the small community centres and a playground, there is no other community infrastructure (e.g. recreation facilities, oval, gardens). However, these have been in place, or at least planned for, in the past.	One of the oldest and largest Town Camps in Alice Springs. Has a community centre that offers programs and support. Outside of the small community centres and a playground, there is no other community infrastructure (e.g. recreation facilities, oval, gardens). However, these have been in place, or at least planned for, in the past.
<i>Territory Health Services (hearing, dental, renal, maternal child health, hospital, etc). Centrelink. Job agencies. Primary schools. Local service coordination networks. Northern Territory Government Departments of Health and Education. Training organisations. Employment services.</i> <i>A range of other services and organisations that were identified during operations.</i>	

195 CDEP – Community Development Employment Program



## Appendix 6: Growth towards the full CG Approach

The following provides a high-level summary of the extent to which operations have grown towards implementation of the CG Approach for each community.

Tracking against full CG Approach	CEP	<25%	25-50%	50-75%	75-100%
	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Irrkerlantye					
Mpweringke Anapipe					
Yarrenyty Arltere					
Uyenpere Atwatye					

The following provides a summary of the extent to which operations have grown towards implementation of the CG Approach by each service and area of Children's Ground integrated Learning, Wellbeing & Development platform.

	2017	2019
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### Learning & Wellbeing (phased implementation)

#### Stage 1 (Year 1-4)

Early years learning		
Extended hours learning (after-hours, school holidays)		
Primary school learning		

#### Stage 2-4 (Year 5-15)

Primary (stage 2)		
Secondary (stage 3)		
Post-secondary pathways and support (stage 4)		

### Family Health & Wellbeing

Maternal and child health promotion		
Family health promotion		
Nutrition		
Social and emotional wellbeing		
Environmental health		
Health system access		

### Economic Development & Wellbeing

Community level local employment		
Training and professional development		
Financial and consumer literacy		
Enterprise		

<b>Cultural &amp; Creative Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2019</b>
Elders leadership		
Local First Nations language and cultural revitalization and strengthening		
Creative arts and music		
<b>Community Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>		
Local First Nations regional and community governance		
Place based, intergenerational delivery		
Community development		
<b>Integrated and coordinated delivery</b>		
Internal integration of services		
Local services collaboration		

The process and delivery elements most impacted by the limited resources of the growth model, which subsequently impacted engagement, included:

- A lack of Community Development staff for each community, impacting the capacity for ongoing Walk, Talk & Act and widespread engagement in community-by-community planning and governance
- Limitations on widespread First Nations employment
- Minimal resources for social/emotional wellbeing and high demands across generations, resulting in a lack of capacity for widespread and readily available support for intergenerational trauma
- Limited capacity for full implementation of the Learning & Wellbeing platform. Without full delivery of learning across weekdays, evenings and weekends and school holidays, children and families were limited in when they could engage
- Challenges with supply and demand – lack of vehicles to pick up all children and families wanting to engage impacted engagement and regular engagement of some children and families
- Family and child engagement - limited staff were working across many areas. In the full CG Approach, when families experience challenging times and engagement barriers, an extended team of the community development, social/emotional wellbeing and other health staff are mobilised to visit families and provide support
- Family Health & Wellbeing delivery on a small scale funded largely for only three of the four communities, resulting in reduced capacity for wrap around support that is an enabler for active and regular engagement in learning, health, employment and governance
- Delivering in and with community (place-based) was limited by the lack of access to infrastructure in communities and the staff resources to establish teams in each community, with staff having to work across communities in delivery. This reduced the capacity to have intergenerational hubs of safety, learning and wellbeing in each community and relationship development
- Limited capacity for regular family and community events and celebrations that are the early foundations of building social and cultural capital within and across communities
- Resource and time constraints to extensively establish reciprocal collaborations and partnerships within the local service system; this was only achieved with some services and organisations. It is important that this remains a high priority to ensure that Children's Ground's services and supports are embedded within the local service system to achieve streamlined and integrated access for children and families, many of whom experience multiple, complex generational concerns and risks in education, health, social and economic outcomes
- The lack of resources also impacted the staff who were stretched and working within a context of high demand. Immature operational systems including HR and IT systems impacted efficiency, effectiveness and quality of services. Over the course of three years, each of these areas matured





## Appendix 7: Process findings – further implementation details

### Child, family & community led

#### **Anwerne Ampe-kenhe Ahelhele iwerre arratye alhetyeke akwete community-ele arlke apentetyeke (Community to lead the way)**

This principle recognises that Children's Ground belongs to the families (including children) and communities. They are integrally involved in the governance, design and delivery of their programs and services and lead the day to day operations. This includes recognition of First Nations governance and leadership structures.

From 2017, in community level leadership:

- One community met regularly at Children's Ground due to the lack of infrastructure in community
- One community combined meetings at the Children's Ground centre as well as in community
- One community met only in their community from the outset across different family groups with daily governance in learning sessions having an important role in whole of community decision-making

The number of people engaged in daily governance is not yet fully recorded. The formalisation of these practices has been impacted by the delivery of a growth model and are continuing to grow and strengthen.

In addition to governance structures, Children's Ground uses three types of plans to promote local leadership, empowerment and agency: individualised learning and

wellbeing plans for children; family health and wellbeing plans; and community plans. These formal structures and processes prioritise the voices of children, their families and communities. Plans, actions and aspirations from these are used to monitor progress and to ensure relevance and responsiveness to people's priorities and visions.

During the period, community plans for each community were developed. The development of individualised learning and wellbeing plans for children and family health and wellbeing plans progressed but more slowly. The demands of service establishment, lack of personnel to meet demand and the time required from staff on logistics meant that this work was not embedded fully during the period.

### Deliver the whole, not the bits

#### **Arne ingkerrenyeke anyentelhe iletyeke: tyerretye ngwenhe mwerre anetyeke, akaltye irremele, tyerretye ngwenge artweye mapenge (Connect everything: learning, health culture, work)**

This principle upholds that addressing the social, structural and economic factors that contribute to extreme economic poverty, inequity and intergenerational disadvantage in the communities in which Children's Ground works is critical to lasting positive outcomes. It supports a shift from single issue responses to a comprehensive, integrated response by addressing all issues that impact a child's life - education, health, wellbeing, economy, society, law, environment and culture.

### **Integration across Children's Ground's LWD platform**

As at the end of 2019, integrated practice across Children's Ground's LWD platform included:

- Regular coordination of services internally and externally
  - On 111 occasions, staff collaborated<sup>196</sup> with another Children's Ground staff member to coordinate internal or external service delivery
  - On 157 occasions, staff coordinated a health appointment at Children's Ground or at a local health service or coordinated and supported other services to work together
- First Nations staff are employed across all areas of the service platform and some across multiple areas
- Community governance and decision-making with families/users crosses all operational platform areas and is included as part of daily practice
- Increased delivery of early learning, family health and increased First Nations employment all contributed to increasing child and family engagement, which increased engagement in governance for the Central Australian region, for each community and opportunities for daily governance with families ('users')
- Creative arts are embedded in employment, learning and community development
- The Men's & Youth team was established as a core part of the family health team and worked to minimise family violence and unemployment and to promote suicide prevention through positive social and emotional wellbeing. The young people and men work across the Children's Ground platform in family support, household and community environmental health and delivering cultural learning with the early years sessions

<sup>196</sup> This may be known as 'referral' in other organisations, however Children's Ground does not 'refer' instead the process is collaboration between staff and families and supported referral and engagement with other services

- First language and cultural learning resources are developed for and within the learning platform. This promotes social, cultural and emotional wellbeing, cultural and language revitalisation, creative arts and expression and economic development as a small social enterprise
- All new staff spend time in learning sessions to build relationships with children and families

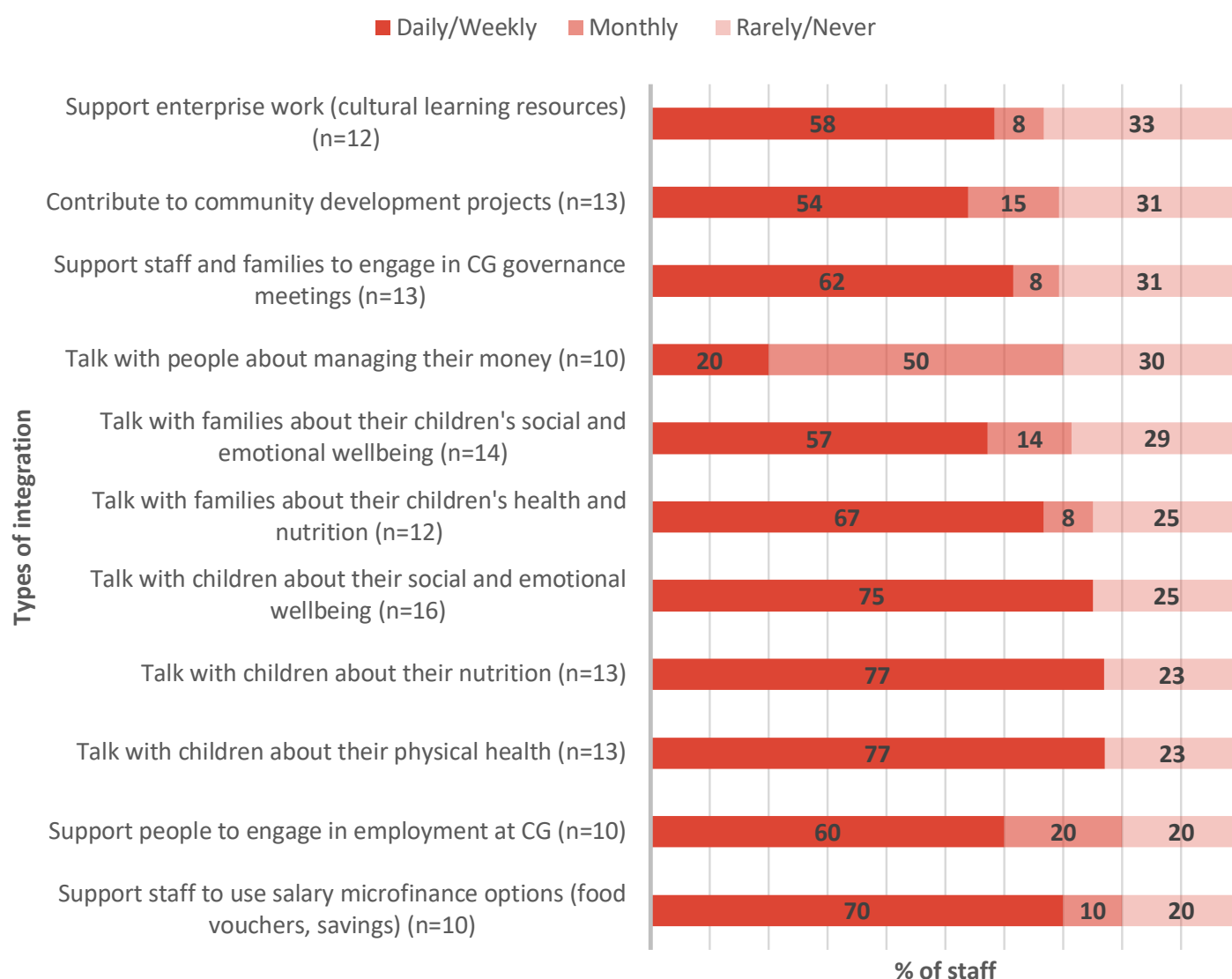
Staff members were asked about the frequency (daily, weekly, monthly, rarely, never) of their engagement in and support of work across each service area of the LWD platform. To understand the extent to which different types of integrated practice occurred, staff members were asked questions consistent with the following:

- For work and content related to Learning & Wellbeing, only staff **who do not work** in the learning team were asked to answer these questions.
- For work and content related to Family Health & Wellbeing, only staff **who do not work** in the health team were asked to answer these questions.
- And so on for each service platform of the CG Approach.

Graph 13 and 14 present the areas where integrated service delivery is working effectively across the LWD platform and areas where additional resourcing and improvement are required. Because the questions targeted particular teams, the denominator is different and included against each type of integration.



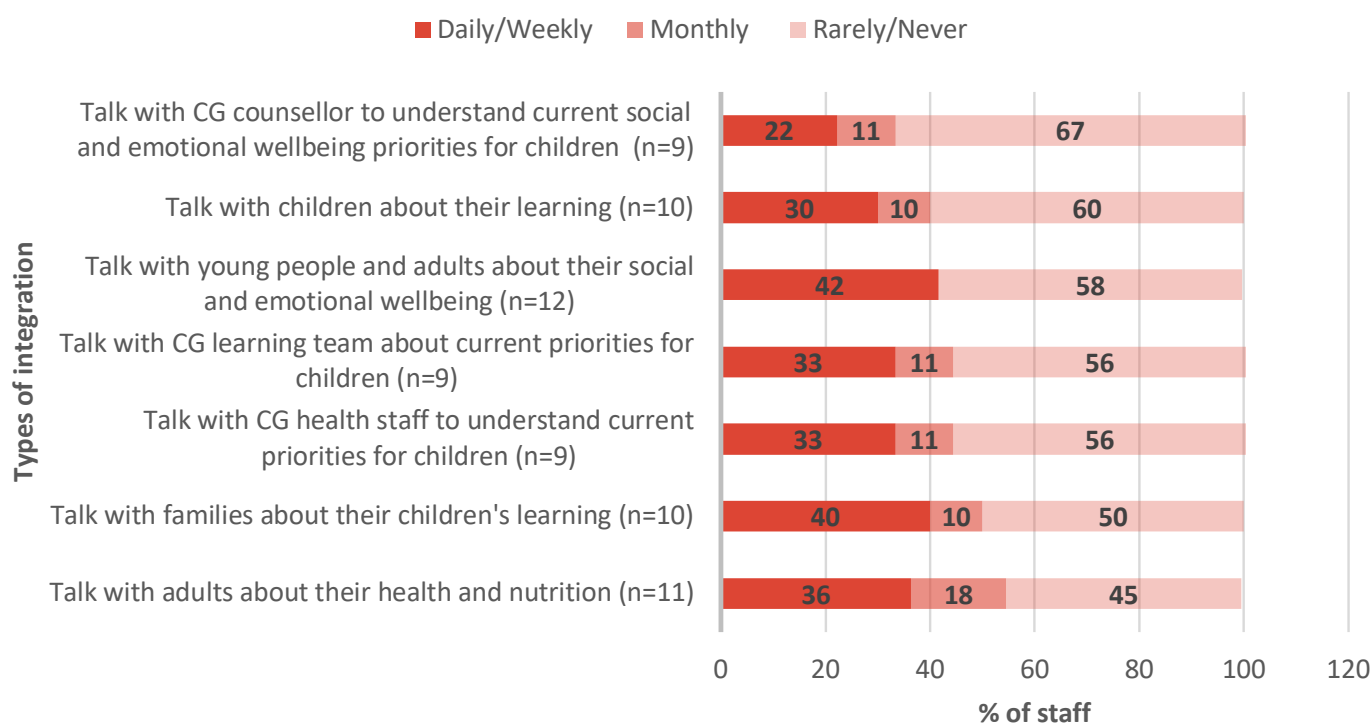
**Graph 13: Types of integration being implemented effectively (implemented by at least 65% of staff daily, weekly or monthly)**







**Graph 14: Types of integration requiring improvement (implemented by 50% or less of staff daily, weekly or monthly)**



An important element of Children's Ground's integrated practice is the intent that whatever part of the LWD platform that children and families engage with, they can access what they need. This may be through Children's Ground staff working together and/or working with other local services to respond (see further details about collaboration with local services below).

Staff (n=23) reported the following:

- 87% of staff agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (48%) that Children's Ground supports families in all parts of their life that impact children's learning, health and wellbeing, employment.
- 83% of staff agreed (57%) or strongly agreed (26%) that whatever part of Children's Ground a child/family connects with first, they are supported to access all services they want/need.

- 87% of staff agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (57%) that when a child/family connects with Children's Ground, they are supported to access other local services and supports they want/need.

When asked about the impact of staff working closely with other Children's Ground teams, they reported the following:

- 77% (n=22) reported internal integration helped better respond to child and family needs
- 74% (n=23) reported that integration led to earlier identification of child and family needs
- 83% (n=23) reported increased your ability to reach and engage with children and families

## Collaboration with local services

An important element of Children's Ground's integrated practice is working with other local services to respond to the needs of children and families.

Effective service partnerships and relationships included:

- **Hearing and ear health:** hearing services engaged in Children's Ground's learning (centre-based and on country learning) to undertake hearing tests with children and adults. They provided family education and support to identify children with severe hearing impairment who had never accessed services. This collaboration was in place in the first year of Children's Ground operations, however, dropped off due to staff turnover in both organisations. This relationship has recently been re-established.
- **Dental and oral health:** local dental health service engaged regularly in Children's Ground early learning, delivering oral health promotion with children and families and undertaking dental checks. This collaboration resulted in the dental service establishing a set weekly appointment for Children's Ground families, who are supported to attend.
- **Traditional health and healing:** implementation of Children's Ground Family Health & Wellbeing framework, *Health in the Hands of the People*, was undertaken in partnership with the Arrernte traditional healing centre (Akeyulerre) whose primary focus is increasing access to traditional cultural practices, including bush medicine, Angangkeroes (traditional healers) and cultural learning and transmission.
- **Place-based delivery:** First Nations leaders have led the establishment of Children's Ground early learning in community centres through their relevant housing associations. As described in section '*Principle: In-Community (place-based)*', this started occurring slowly to enable place-based delivery and there is the hope and intention that this continues to grow.
- **Schools and education:** Children's Ground has a partnership with Yipirinya School (local school that caters for Aboriginal students) that to date has included First Nations educators sharing resources and professional development. It is anticipated that this partnership will strengthen and grow over time. Discussions with local government schools have occurred, however, the capacity to dedicate time to continuing these conversations about potential partnerships was affected due to capacity constraints.



As noted in the related section of the main report, the small number and diversity in types of local service providers who responded to the online survey meant that data was too varied to present any clear themes in relation to types of service coordination and collaboration.

The only clear theme to emerge from the anonymous online survey completed by local services was that two service providers reported engaging monthly with Children's Ground's health and nutrition, cultural and creative arts and social/emotional wellbeing. Three reported engaging monthly with Children's Ground's early years learning.

Of those who reported working with Children's Ground:

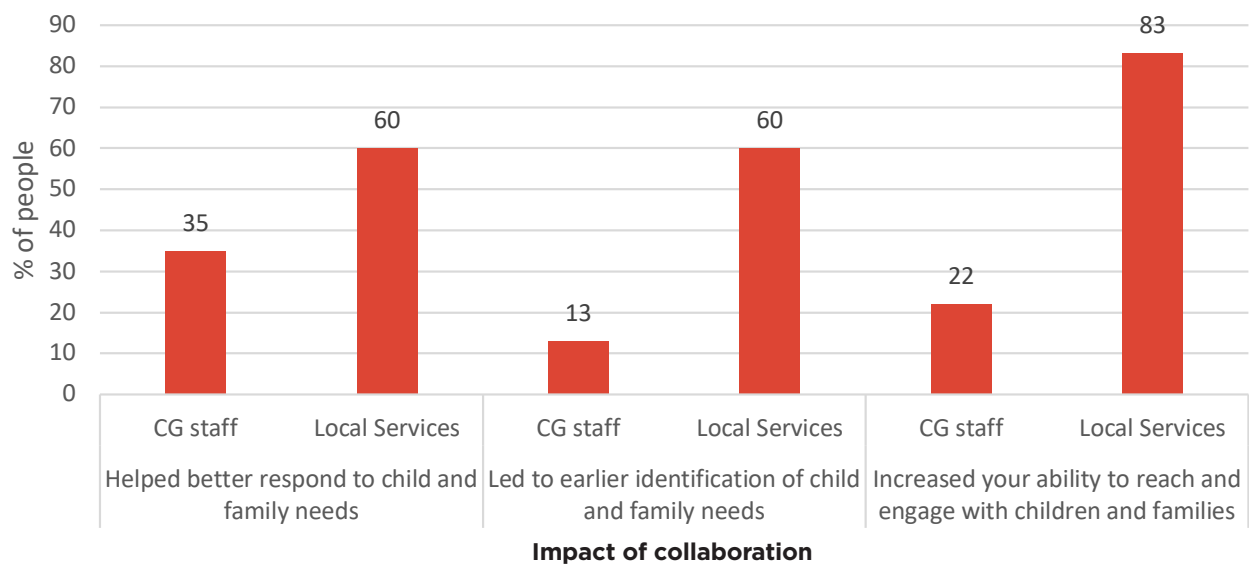
- Four reported 'Information and/or data sharing', 'Work collaboratively to support children, young people and families' and 'Asking Children's Ground to pass on messages to families'.
- Three reported 'Occasional meetings about children, young people and families', 'Running joint activities, events or projects' and 'Supporting each other's projects, events, activities'.
- Two reported 'Population/Community level joint planning'.

Local services and Children's Ground staff were asked about key elements that are enablers for service coordination, collaboration and partnerships – 90-100% of staff (n=12) and local services (n=6) reported the following as important enablers: Knowing how the other service works; Relationships with staff between services; Similar service values; the other service is responsive. This was consistent with evaluation interviews where both staff and local services referred to local collaboration breaking down at points in time when there was staff turnover in either Children's Ground or the local service.

Despite clear agreements between Children's Ground staff and local services about enablers for collaboration, Graph 5 shows that each had different experiences in relation to the positive impact of local collaborations over the first years of the CG Approach in Central Australia.



Graph 15: Children’s Ground staff and local service perceptions of impact of local collaboration



From the local services survey, four people reported ‘Asking Children’s Ground to pass on messages to families’. This is consistent with the evaluation of Kakadu; in both evaluations, local services referred to the extent and strength of the relationships between families and Children’s Ground as the enabler.

*“We have a lot of case management for people, but Children’s Ground has relationships which is so valuable... I feel like that’s what will get kids to appointments.”*

Local service provider, 2020

This supports the decision of Children’s Ground to prioritise building relationships with families.

In evaluation focus groups with Children’s Ground staff, all staff referred to the need and their desire to increase connections with local services to support children and families, yet the majority of staff reported experiencing challenges in engaging with local services. The strongest

themes to emerge from staff included: a lack of time to prioritise building relationships with local services over core Children’s Ground delivery; limitations in flexibility of other services to effectively coordinate and collaborate delivery due to the rigid systems they work within; and staff being unsure of how to navigate the historical politics between local services. The systemic limitations of local services emerged as a theme in four of the seven local services interviewed.

One service provider described using their regular collaboration with Children’s Ground as a training opportunity for students on placement and staff within their service.

*“When you’re thrown into an environment that’s polar opposite [in community/non-clinical setting], it can be a bit daunting. So it’s been often a platform for me to train staff to be able to provide education in this way when I’m not there. And I’m hoping to build on that more.”*

Local service provider, 2020





*In-  
community  
(place-based)*

**Ingkerrenyeke apmerenye apurte-irreme apmerenge**  
(In community – place based)

This principle recognises that for children, families and the whole community to enjoy environments of inclusion, safety and cultural, social and economic capital, it is important to take services, supports and governance (decision-making) to people, into their communities, where they live.

This is a by community summary of growing Children's Ground's place-based delivery:

- In one community, 2017-18 saw strong collaborations established with the arts program within the community centre, however a lack of interagency collaboration limited the ability for Children's Ground to deliver early years learning at the centre. In response to this, community leadership requested Children's Ground to have a space to deliver early learning within the community centre area and a demountable was made available to Children's Ground for operations. Collaborations continue with the arts programs at the centre.
- In one community, place-based 'in-community' delivery has been challenging because some families live on their traditional lands while others need to live in Alice Springs for health, employment and other reasons. From 2017-19, early learning delivery occurred on country and in community for families at one homeland where the most children lived. In late 2019, Children's Ground was able to secure a demountable building on one of the homelands that is shared by children and families spread across the homelands. This was the beginning of their local intergenerational hub of learning, safety and wellbeing.
- Place-based delivery has been challenging from the outset in one community where they continue to have no housing, water infrastructure or land tenure. Because of this, only a few residents live here. Early learning occurs here similarly to a learning on country session where children, families, staff and resources are taken to and from the location for delivery. As part of Community Development and Wellbeing, Children's Ground has been supporting Traditional Owners in their negotiations with Government to secure access to basic needs and essential services. Community leaders have a vision for housing and an intergenerational centre for learning, wellbeing and local economic development. Place-based delivery and residing in their community remains challenging for these families.
- In another community, place-based delivery occurred from the outset. The decision was made by community leaders to negotiate with relevant local stakeholders to begin Children's Ground delivery on country and in community at their local community centre.



*Innovation –  
combining old  
and new*

**Arne mpwaretyeke arrurle arle mpwarewarretyarte ante nthakenhe arle lyete arne mpwarewarreme arteke** (Always think about old ways and new ways of doing things)

This principle refers to recognition of First Nations knowledge systems and values as the oldest and most developed in the world; combining this with leading global knowledge, practice and innovation; creating a dynamic fusion.

This section articulates the processes established and progressed over the early years of Children's Ground in Central Australia.



**In Learning & Wellbeing**, the Arrernte Elders who lead Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe are celebrated law women and men, linguists, educators, authors and leaders. They have worked for decades with a commitment to education at the highest standards (cultural and Western) and maintaining and passing on cultural law.

Arrernte educators and leaders have been establishing a 'grassroots', community led language and cultural learning and wellbeing environment for children and their families, which focuses on deep and accomplished acquisition of both first language and English numeracy and literacy.

Over time, First Nations and Western-trained educators have together started to articulate a clear approach to achieving learning outcomes for children – which are used to observe, monitor and document children's learning and wellbeing. They have developed cultural and Western early childhood books and learning resources that focus on children's learning of literacy, pre-literacy, numeracy and the health and social/emotional factors that influence children's learning.

*"Some adults and mums are learning with these kids too. It's really good for us teaching the kids – they are listening and watching and talking and learning... learning about health and culture. Kids and adults are learning how to walk in both worlds."*

Family/Staff member, 2019

**In Family Health & Wellbeing**, since July 2018 when this platform of the CG Approach was funded and operationalised, cultural health promotion, planning and responses have been embedded in health promotion and support practices, alongside the Western social health and wellbeing model. Cultural health promotion includes children, young people and families learning about bush foods and medicines, including how to collect and prepare them and their nutritional value and other uses. Health promotion around safety on country and looking after oneself is regularly delivered in early learning and on country trips and camps.

Cultural responses to health concerns and conditions include supported access to Angangkere (traditional healers), bush medicine, spending time on country and extensive support for sorry business and funeral cultural protocols. An increasing number of First Nations people employed in the family health team has started working with Elders to articulate cultural practices and protocols in key areas of the health platform, such as the smoking of babies through maternal and child health delivery and culturally based social/emotional wellbeing resources.

Cultural health responses have also been enabled and facilitated through Children's Ground funding and partnership with Akeyulerre (traditional healing centre), whose primary focus is to increase access to traditional healing and bush medicines for Arrernte people across the community, particularly those who do not have the resources to live on or travel to their country.



**In Community Development & Wellbeing,** First Nations governance and voice is central to all decision-making and planning. Some governance meetings are for First Nations people only, though a non-First Nations person may be present to contribute. This allows space for Ingkerrekele Arntante-areme to make significant decisions without the input of non-First Nations staff. If the culturally appropriate people are not in the room, then First Nations governance protocols are followed by leaders and families to ensure each decision is made by or informed by the right person or people.

As previously described, community planning and reporting processes ensure each community is leading the planning for learning, health and wellbeing for their children and grandchildren.

Each year, First Nations staff members produce a Community Report. This process is about community reporting back to community. Children's Ground is also establishing more formalised processes for more regular reporting by Children's Ground operational areas to communities.



**In Economic Development & Wellbeing (employment and enterprise),** First Nations language and culture are privileged through employment contracts and have been the basis of initial enterprise development.

**Employment:** people report working in an environment where their first language is used every day at work – and where the workforce reflects their language and culture.

*"When I walk in I see Arrernte people everywhere. I see my people and hear my language."*

*"There is [Arrernte] language everywhere, and a lot of people talk in language to people about things. The expectation is that staff [non-First Nations] learn some of it. So even just speaking in the language is now becoming part of everyone's everyday life."*

**Family/Staff members, 2019**

In each service area of the CG Approach, there are roles based on First Nations cultural knowledge systems and practices and Western qualifications and knowledge. These roles are remunerated equally in line with cultural and Western standards and salary scales respectively.

Children's Ground has variable employment contracts which enable flexibility for people to take time off work for important ceremonies and men's/women's business. Staff members are not penalised for taking significant periods of time away from work and taking children away from learning, because these cultural practices are critical to self-identity and are important learning experiences for children of all ages.

**Enterprise:** the first enterprise to be established through Children's Ground in Central Australia was developed from a cultural base. It focused on First Nations children's story books that emerged from the early learning books that educators wrote as cultural teaching resources from the early days of Children's Ground.



#### **In Creative & Cultural Development and Wellbeing:**

In addition to cultural knowledge and practices being embedded across each element of the CG Approach, culture is celebrated and enacted in many ways. Cultural events are held internally and with local partners engaging the Arrernte nation more broadly. First Nations families are supported to engage with healing camps and other events organised by other local organisations as opportunities for families to share and celebrate their culture.

As resources and the CG Approach have grown, so has the delivery of targeted cultural learning and transmission between Elders, adults and young people. This includes dedicated cultural learning sessions for young leaders, women and men to continue building their cultural knowledge as the next generation of leaders.

Creative arts is an important teaching and learning approach embedded in early learning for both cultural and Western learning. It is also present in celebrations in the form of traditional dance, songs, music and paintings.

Children's Ground staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) and local services were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that 'Children's Ground always thinks about the old ways and new ways of doing things (First Nations & Western)'.

- 91% of staff (n=23) agreed (52%) or strongly agreed (39%)
- 83% of local services (n=6) agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (50%)





*Expect and deliver the best*

### **Iwenheke apeke unte lyernpenye unte anthetyeke (Expect and deliver the best)**

This principle sets the standard for excellence that all children and families deserve to enable long-term wellbeing. It aims to provide the best resources and services applicable to each situation. It encourages Children's Ground to communicate and operate in a way that makes it clear that they expect and encourage the best of all people involved (staff, children, families).

## **Delivery in communities**

**Community leadership and standards:** see principle 'Child, Family and Community led.'

**Teaching and learning standards (First Nations and Western):** Children's Ground's Learning & Wellbeing delivery is not a registered early childhood service, though it internally assesses learning against key areas of national Western regulations and quality standards, particularly in relation to risk and safety (including the 10 key policies), staff-to-child ratios, learning program quality, relationships with families, etc. Children's Ground is also assessed against cultural standards of teaching, learning, safety, relationships and protocols, based on Arrernte early learning curriculum and standards.

**Nutrition, food and health and wellbeing safety standards:** Children's Ground has worked towards establishing a nutrition policy that relates to all meals and snacks provided in early learning, governance meetings, family nights, community events and celebrations. In 2019, Children's Ground started the process of becoming a registered food business, with all Western health and food safety standards adhered to – certification was achieved after the period of this evaluation.

Five First Nations staff were trained in food handling, preparation and storage. These are important standards to maintain as the implementation of the daily nutrition program has grown, including nutritious meals provided in all learning sessions. Occupational health, safety and compliance policies and training are also established and enacted in delivery, from both a Western and cultural perspective.

**Local policy development with First Nations staff:** all local policies are developed with First Nations governance groups. Some of these key policies included: Core early childhood regulation policies; Food safety and handling; Nutrition policy; OH&S policies; Employment compliance; Working with vulnerable people policy. These have all been developed through both a Western and cultural lens to ensure cultural safety and adherence to laws and protocols within both systems. Over the first three years of establishing and growing the CG Approach, it has been important to take the time to genuinely enfranchise and empower First Nations leaders and families in designing and enacting these policies.

Limited resources and the inability to deliver the full CG Approach from the outset has impacted local policy development – therefore work continues in this space to achieve excellence at a Children's Ground standard.

**Professional development and training:** over the first three years, staff professional development has primarily included training delivery and working to embed staff work planning policies, structures and processes (see more about this below in 'organisational systems'). To date, training and professional development have focused on:

- Western legal compliance training, such as OH&S, employment compliance training, first aid, mandatory reporting, food safety, etc
- Western employment support training, such as governance, family wellbeing and leadership, early childhood development and learning, youth leadership, Light Rigid driver's licence endorsement, computer literacy, nutrition, evaluation, etc
- Informal cultural employment and training, including cultural awareness, understanding, learning and competence
- Peer learning and mentoring, which has primarily been on-the-job between First Nations and Western-trained staff in both cultural and Western practices and knowledge across each area of the CG Approach

Professional development has been delivered as formal and informal training to both large or small groups and for individuals as needed. Over time, some informal trainings have become formalised and embedded in local and organisational policies and procedures and monitored through the organisation's electronic compliance system. Further resources and efforts are required to continue strengthening and embedding some existing professional development and to create new and individualised training opportunities for staff based on work plans and career aspirations.



**Regular and effective communication:** over the first three years, the Children's Ground team has seen a significant increase in staff. Moving from a small team, where communication is easy, to a larger team has required regular review and change management processes. This has been managed with structured processes for communications in a highly dynamic environment.

As the team has grown, effective communication has included regular meetings. These seek to ensure daily operations are effective and efficient and that communications are enabling and supporting integrated practice. It also aims to ensure that strategic and operational planning and decision-making are occurring regularly. By the end of 2019, the following meeting schedules were in place to achieve effective communication:

- Daily morning staff 'check-ins'
- Weekly staff meetings in each team
- Fortnightly staff meetings between Early Years and Family Health staff
- Weekly governance meetings (that include decision-making, planning and professional development)
- At least quarterly check-ins with all staff by management
- Regular email updates from Directors, with key information printed and placed on meeting room walls for staff who do not use computers/email

There have been periods where communication was effective and periods where the team experienced the consequences of ineffective or inadequate communication. Monitoring and reviewing communication across each team and the region is an ongoing priority.





**Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E):** a local M&E framework and range of initial data collection tools were designed and developed from the outset with First Nations leaders in 2017. As additional CG Approach platform areas became funded and operational (i.e. family health, enterprise, Men & Youth), M&E tools were developed in line with the short and medium-term progress indicators and long-term outcomes.

Embedding M&E as core practice for all staff and all areas of the CG Approach has slowly increased over the first 3-4 years. As resources grow, there remain areas to continue strengthening M&E in respect to data collection, reporting and feedback loops. More regular access to data (monthly, weekly) will increase engagement in the Children's Ground data story, contributing to the journey of embedding M&E processes (from data collection through to use) as core practice for all staff and communities.

Building First Nations leadership in M&E occurred from the outset with the small group of staff and community leaders. As the number of First Nations staff and leaders increased, so too did engagement in M&E design and implementation. At times, it was challenging for the teams to prioritise research and evaluation engagement and work, however, this was also the case for other areas of the CG Approach due to the limited resources of the growth model.

Continuous quality improvement and 'ground-truthing' data with staff and communities have been important for M&E from the outset. Children's Ground sought to provide regular access to data for review and planning. There have been periods where quarterly data feedback loops were occurring effectively and staff were able to use the participation data in their operational planning. However, there have also been periods where this was not achieved due to the time-consuming nature of manual data cleaning, entry and extraction, and limited staff resources of the growth model.

## Organisational backbone standards and support

Children's Ground still considers itself a start-up organisation and lacks adequate funding to fully resource the backbone organisational structural support systems (human resources, finance, etc) and Research & Evaluation. Evidence from this evaluation demonstrates that a continued focus on resourcing key standards, practices and systems for excellence in operations and the enabling organisational elements is required and critically important.

Operational and organisational standards and quality were compromised in 2017 and 2018, particularly due to:

- Insufficient personnel resources impacting:
  - Learning delivery capacity to meet demands of community
  - Learning delivery quality due to recruitment challenges, limited funding to recruit the necessary number of educators (First Nations and Western-trained), Western-trained staff turnover and limited resources to adequately support First Nations staff
  - Lack of full policies and procedures and relevant training in place
- Insufficient resources impacting efficiency and quality in relation to:
  - Human resource processes
  - IT systems

In 2018, a wellbeing review of Children's Ground's people and culture found that staff experienced significant challenges due to the fast growth of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe without the adequate resources and systems to respond to need and demand.

Organisational areas that have strengthened to the point where they are being implemented as intended, with ongoing review, include:

- Expecting and achieving excellence in dual organisational governance.
- A staff performance and review process referred to as the QPRS (Quality, Planning, Review & Support) system. Designed with staff, this system began being trialled in early 2020 and has shown to improve areas identified by staff as challenging.

## Appendix 8: Child learning and wellbeing progress focus areas

Child learning and wellbeing progress focus areas include high-level child outcome and areas within each outcome that are the strengths, skills and knowledge monitored by Arrernte and Western-trained early childhood educators.

### ***Learning and wellbeing observation progress scale***

*Children demonstrate the knowledge, skills and dispositions articulated...:*

- All the time
- Most of the time
- Some of the time
- Not very often
- Not at all
- Don't know

### ***Outcomes and an example of sub-elements***

*Outcome: Children understand kinship in relation to identity, roles and responsibilities*

e.g. Children express increasing respect, consideration and fairness towards others; Children have increasing skills and knowledge to engage in relationships with others based on kinship.

*Outcome: Children have cultural and creative knowledge and understanding*

e.g. Children begin to acknowledge their history and the knowledge taught from the old people/Elders.

*Outcome: Children use language to communicate, contribute and connect with people and the land*

First language(s)

e.g. Children use first language to effectively engage in verbal and non-verbal interactions.

English Language

e.g. Children use English to effectively engage in verbal and non-verbal interactions.

*Outcome: Children have awareness and understanding of how to keep their spirit (utnenge) strong and healthy*

e.g. Children develop their understanding of the connection between land and their spirit.

*Outcome: Children are enthusiastic and committed to learning and are skilled across areas for life*

e.g. Children begin to see how symbols and pattern systems work (related to mathematic skills development).

*Outcome: Children have independence in their ability to look after themselves*

e.g. Children develop skills and knowledge to be safe on country and in community.

*Outcome: Children have a healthy mind and body*

e.g. Children develop a range of knowledge and skills to become healthy and confident in their physical wellbeing.





## Appendix 9: 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





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