



children's  
ground

# Utnenge, Tyerrtye, Mwerre Atnyenetyeke Itye Tyerrtye Urrperle-kenhenge

Health in the Hands of the People

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Children's Ground Family Health and Wellbeing Framework

## SUMMARY





**“The way we think about health at Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children’s Ground) is through our holistic First Nations perspective. For our kids to walk in both worlds, we know that it’s important to look at the Western health system too. We are taking health back to the people and making sure our families know and control their health story.”**

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Governance Committee,  
Central Australia



Anna Maria teaching Shania, Liliana and Seymour on Country in Central Australia

Australia has a world class health system. Despite this, First Nations people consistently have the poorest health outcomes and a burden of disease irreconcilable with the standards of health and wellbeing experienced by most Australians. While there have been important gains over the past decade in some areas, the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people requires serious reconsideration of how we deliver health. The health system is not connecting with First Nations people in an effective way to promote and secure the foundations for wellbeing over the life course. The significant gap is in responding to the social, cultural and economic determinants of health.

#### Key Statistics

- The burden of disease is 2.3 times higher for Indigenous than non-Indigenous Australians, while health expenditure is only 1.5 times greater
- 39% of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health outcomes can be explained by social determinants
- The Indigenous suicide rate has increased by 32% from 1998 to 2015. Source: 2017 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework and 2015 AIHW: The health and welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Children’s Ground is a systemic approach to improving wellbeing for children and families living in First Nations communities experiencing extreme social and economic disadvantage. Our approach targets all of the social, cultural and economic determinants of health. We work with communities over a 25-year period to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage and enable a generation of children to grow up happy, healthy and enjoying lives of opportunity. We advance wellbeing across five integrated service platforms: learning, family health, economic development, community development and cultural development.

**“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.”<sup>1</sup>**

June Oscar (AO), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

**Figure 1: Family Health and Wellbeing is one of the five integrated service areas of the Children’s Ground Approach**



#### CONTRIBUTORS

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<sup>1</sup> June Oscar (AO). (2018). Apology Breakfast Speech, Reconciliation SA, Adelaide, SA, February 2018. Available at: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/news/speeches/reconciliation-south-australia-10th-anniversary-apology>



## Placing health in the hands of the people to strengthen Australia's Health system

"Health promotion works through concrete and effective community action in setting priorities, making decisions, planning strategies and implementing them to achieve better health. At the heart of this process is the empowerment of communities - their ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies."

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, 1986

*Health in the Hands of the People* is a Family Health and Wellbeing Framework - one of the Children's Ground five integrated service areas. It is not a clinical service. Rather, it is a health promotion and approach. It embraces First Culture and responds to the needs of First Nations people and communities living with extreme social and economic disadvantage and cultural exclusion.

It is designed to complement the existing health system and strengthen delivery on national and international policy intent. By reaching the people that the current system typically struggles to serve, it seeks to enhance the system's effectiveness and efficiency. It is set up to provide the 'bridge' between the people, the services, the clinics and the hospitals, to support better engagement, earlier presentation and improved self-management of health issues.

At a cost of less than 10% of the total government expenditure per person on Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, it can be considered a small investment to empower people in their own health, prevent illness and add value to the existing service system.

First Nations people are the drivers, rather than just the recipients in this approach. *Health in the Hands of the People* is designed so that people have choice and agency over their own health needs, health solutions and care pathways. By doing so, it intends to demonstrate an effective model for working with these communities that can be scaled and implemented by the government and service providers working in similar contexts.

### Policy Context

Australian policy principles provide a strong framework for reducing health inequality for First Nations Australians. Children's Ground is designed to strengthen implementation of these principles in practice.

*"The Australian health system is free of racism and inequality and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to health services that are effective and high quality, appropriate and affordable. Together with strategies to address social inequalities and determinants of health, this provides the necessary platform to realise health equality by 2031."* - Vision of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, 2013-2023

### *Health in the Hands of the People* is implemented by a dedicated family health team that includes:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Health Workers
- Public health practitioners
- Cultural health specialists (e.g. traditional healers and bush medicine experts)
- Nutritionists and nutrition staff
- Social and emotional wellbeing practitioners/counsellors
- Community development and environmental health workers.

Within the Children's Ground Approach, health promotion and wellbeing is the responsibility of the entire multidisciplinary staff team including educationalists, creative arts workers, community development and economic development staff. They complement, support and embed the practice and knowledge promoted by the family health team.



Early Years Learners Susan and Mena

## There are eight operational components to *Health in the Hands of the People*:

<b>1. Personal and Community Agency</b>	The foundational component for the delivery of the Framework is 'consumer agency': the control and empowerment of individuals, families and communities over their health and wellbeing.
<b>2. Health Promotion</b>	The core of family health and wellbeing work is health promotion, which is based on strong relationships with children and families where they live and in their language and context.
<b>3. Cultural Knowledge Systems</b>	The Framework promotes First Nations cultural health and knowledge systems and practices in their own right with their own integrity, alongside Western health practices.
<b>4. Social and Emotional Wellbeing</b>	The Framework provides holistic support for people's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health that focuses on their strengths and responds to their trauma.
<b>5. Maternal and Child Health Promotion</b>	Given the importance of the early years (starting pre-birth) for long-term health and wellbeing, the Framework has targeted support for maternal and child health promotion.
<b>6. Community and Environmental Health Promotion</b>	The Framework recognises that the health of a child and their family is significantly affected by their living environment and the wellbeing of their community.
<b>7. Partnerships</b>	Given addressing the social determinants of health requires effective cross-sector partnerships, Children's Ground collaborates with other health, housing and community service organisations to assist people and families in meeting their health and wellbeing needs.
<b>8. Evaluation</b>	The Children's Ground 25-year evaluation framework includes a particular focus on long-term health outcomes for children within the broader context of child, family and community health and wellbeing outcomes.

### 1. Personal and Community Agency

The foundational component for the delivery of the Framework is 'consumer agency': the control and empowerment of individuals, families and communities over their health and wellbeing.

This Framework is governed by the people who are the users, empowering them to exercise their knowledge and build their agency to control their own health. Health promotion is immersed in family and cultural contexts, using people's first language and embracing connection to kin and country. It capitalises on the capabilities and expertise that already exist within families and communities, focusing on strengths, resilience and holistic wellbeing rather than deficit or disease.

*Health in the Hands of the People* builds personal and community agency by:

- Supporting and promoting pre-colonisation systems of health and wellbeing
- Conducting strategy, delivery and evaluation by local people
- Delivering where people live
- Delivering health promotion in first language as well as English
- Delivering at mutually agreed times
- Creating relationships based on respect
- Maintaining regular contact and communications allowing for responsiveness and flexibility
- Creating personalised health plans
- Recognising the role of families in health and wellbeing.



Jobeth with her son Jural





Susan, Kiara, Kezia, Mena and Makayla having fun during Learning on Country

## 2. Family Health Promotion

The core of family health and wellbeing work is health promotion, which is based on strong relationships with children and families where they live and in their language and context.

The 2017 Health Performance Framework results indicate 39% of the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is due to social determinants which, along with the high burden of chronic disease, can be addressed in a significant way through health promotion interventions. Health promotion is recognised internationally as the key strategy to reduce health inequality and is central to national policy intentions. *Health in the Hands of the People* is an approach to strengthening health promotion in First Nations communities.

Health promotion occurs in three main ways:

### Health in Learning

Health and wellbeing is part of the learning curriculum from early childhood through to adulthood. This includes:

- A daily check-in with the health promotion specialist
- Nutrition, food security and cooking classes
- Learning on Country sessions that include First Nations health practices
- Early intervention in response to specific health concerns
- Social and emotional wellbeing support
- Visits to the local clinic
- Health and social and emotional wellbeing are core components of curriculum and learning

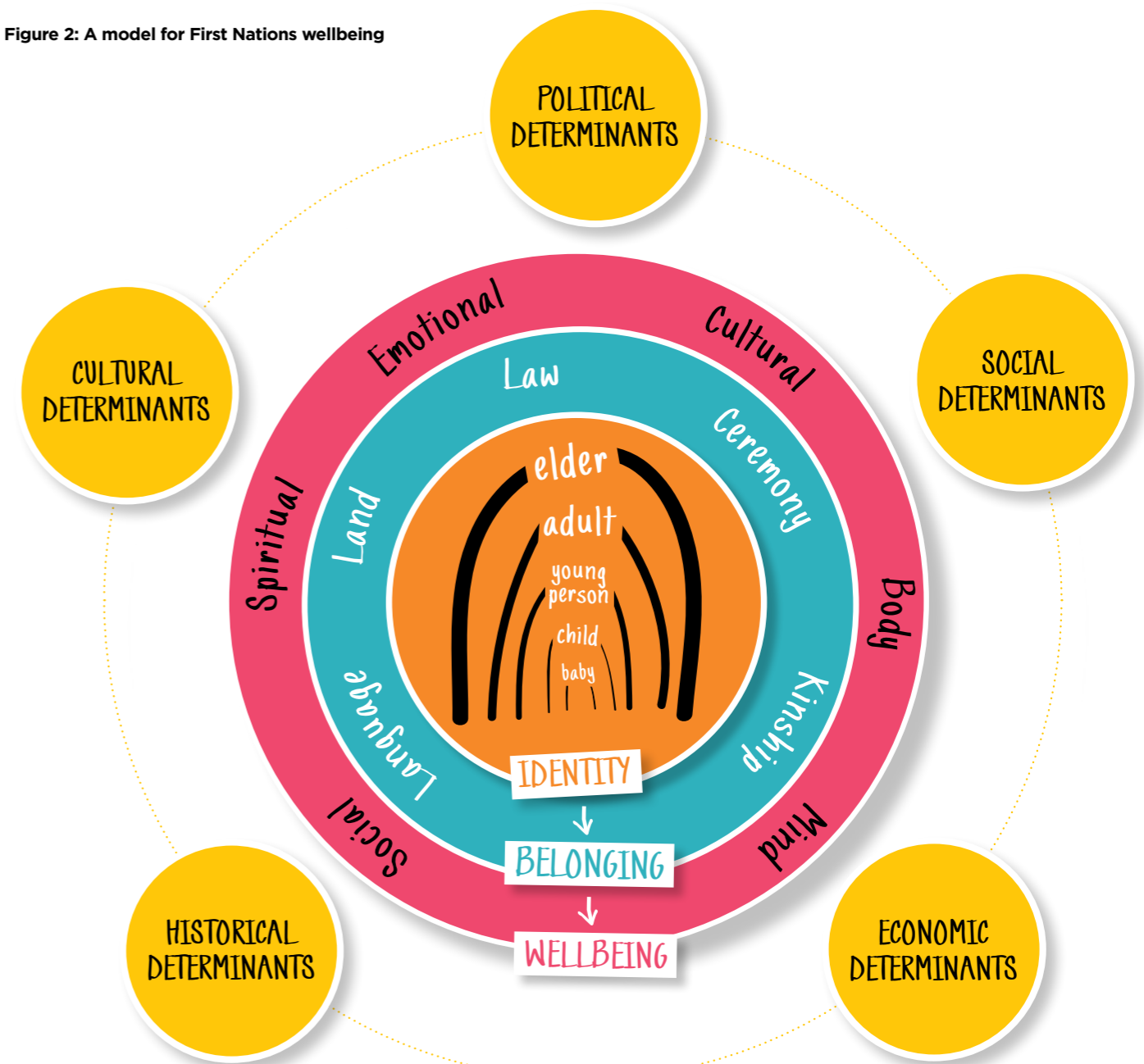
### Health at Home

The family health team takes health and wellbeing to people where they live. They sit down with people where they are most comfortable and have conversations, listen and provide health information. This recognises a reality in which nearly every First Nations family is likely to have at least one family member suffering from ill-health and trauma at any given time; there are often multiple complex health needs within a family simultaneously. Once trust is established, the family health team builds health and wellbeing plans with families, integrating the needs of children, young people, adults, Elders and carers.

### Health in Life

The Children's Ground intergenerational community centre promotes safety, health and wellbeing through daily activities, conversation and formal community governance structures. With each community, environments of safety are created that promote health and wellbeing through daily activities, conversation and formal and informal community governance structures. Health becomes part of life. At community meetings, population health promotion and community health initiatives arise. Physical health, mental health and cultural health become part of daily conversation. Local priorities and strategies are supported. By placing health in the hands of families where they live, we can embed health literacy and solutions at a community level, building 'whole of community' health agency over time in a way that responds to complex health and wellbeing needs.

Figure 2: A model for First Nations wellbeing



## 3. Cultural Knowledge Systems

*Health in the Hands of the People* promotes First Nations cultural health and knowledge systems and practices in their own right with their own integrity, alongside Western health practices.

First Nations Australians have sophisticated knowledge systems and health practices that have been refined for over 60,000 years. Western health systems are not always geared to recognise and take advantage of this existing social and cultural capital. Children's Ground celebrates the right

to practising First Cultural health approaches. We bring First Nations and Western health expertise together as critical partners in achieving positive physical, social and emotional health and wellbeing outcomes.

First Nations health practices recognise a complex and interconnected relationship between the land, law, people and spiritual, emotional and physical health. We support access to and practice of cultural health and wellbeing

knowledge. This is well recognised in medical literature as a strong protective factor for health. We enable regular trips on country, smoking ceremonies and access to traditional healers. Lessons on bush foods and bush medicine form a core part of the learning curriculum and enable intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and health promotion. We support ceremonies and practices relating to birth, maturation and death as a critical contribution to physical, cultural and emotional wellbeing.

Source: 2018 Vadiveloo, J.S., Tilmouth W., Turner, M.K.



## 4. Social and Emotional Wellbeing

The Framework provides holistic support for people's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health that focuses on their strengths and responds to their trauma.

Children's Ground is designed with entire communities experiencing persistent and intergenerational trauma and ongoing stressors that affect social and emotional wellbeing. As with other parts of the Framework, social and emotional wellbeing is taken out of the clinic and into people's daily lives. People are supported to heal, understand past trauma and strengthen protective factors for their long-term social and emotional health. This is achieved

through both formal counselling support and promotion of social and emotional wellbeing with children, their families and the broader community. This includes:

- Articulation, promotion and practice of First Nations knowledge and world view in relation to healing and social and emotional wellbeing
- Integration of social and emotional wellbeing into the early years and learning curriculum to support children to develop social and emotional literacy and behaviours through age-appropriate content and conversations
- protecting and nurturing a child's sense of identity as the foundation for their wellbeing
- A safe environment that can be accessed daily and actively promotes the rights to safety of all children, young people, women, men and elders, for all families
- Counselling that is non-clinic based, accessible, trauma informed, strengths based and culturally grounded
- Therapeutic and healing practice within a range of activities such as creative arts and meditation
- Social and community events that promote connectedness and build social and community capital.

## 5. Maternal and Child Health Promotion

Clinical research has established, incontrovertibly, that the first five years of life, even before birth, are critical for a child's future. Investment in early childhood health, development and wellbeing is the ultimate form of prevention and is well recognised by the World Health Organisation and United Nations as one of the most powerful equalisers in reducing health inequities within a generation.

Given the importance of the early years for long-term health and wellbeing, *Health in the Hands of the People* includes targeted support for maternal and child health. Maternal and child health promotion within the Framework includes:

- Articulation, promotion and practice of First Nations knowledge in relation to maternal and child health
- Maternal health and child health promotion, both formal and informal
- Referrals and support to access maternal and child health clinical services
- Sexual health education targeting sexually active young people
- Targeted childhood health promotion.

The family health team get to know every child and every family in the community. They are aware when a new baby is on the way. Family health practitioners work with families to deliver targeted support for expecting parents when requested.

The focus on child health promotion and early intervention is formalised in personalised learning and wellbeing plans for a child. Daily health practices are supported. The public health specialist and educators work closely with children and families to identify key health issues being experienced by children as well as key health promotion strategies for implementation.

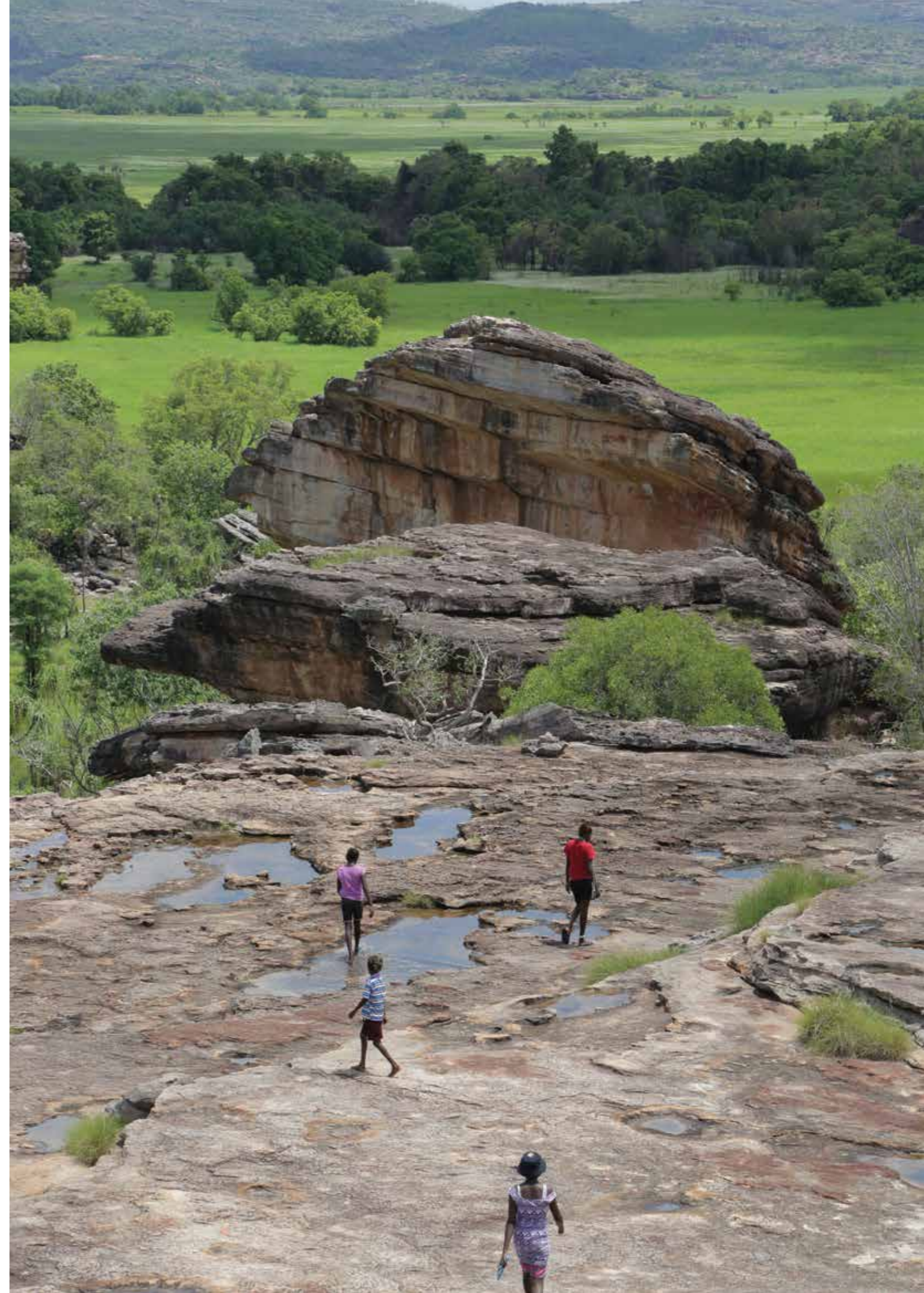
## 6. Community and Environmental Health Promotion

The Framework recognises that the health of a child and their family is significantly affected by their living environment and the wellbeing of their community.

Housing is a key determinant of health and wellbeing. Inadequate housing is a significant contributor to high rates of infectious disease in First Nations communities and increases difficulty in managing chronic disease and raising healthy infants and children.

In response to environmental health concerns, the family health team conducts community initiatives such as animal management, water security improvement and repairs of basic health hardware, washing facilities and safe community areas. Actions arising from individual and family health plans include cleaning of homes and gardens, dust suppression and referrals to maintenance and housing services.

The core of the solution to these environmental health concerns is adequate housing supply and proactive maintenance. In the absence of this, *Health in the Hands of the People* aims to minimise the impacts of poor housing conditions with a view towards prevention of health issues. The family health team responds to priorities identified through family health plans and community meetings.





## 7. Partnerships



Given addressing the social determinants of health requires effective cross-sector partnerships, Children's Ground collaborates with other health, housing and community service organisations to assist people and families in meeting their health and wellbeing needs.

The family health team partners with key health and social services providers to develop effective referral systems and linkage to primary, secondary and tertiary health and wellbeing services. We provide a responsive and integrated way of meeting people's needs on their own terms and assisting them to access care within the broader system.

Partners may include (but are not limited to):

- Medical services
- Aged or disability care services
- Traditional First Nations doctors/healers
- Youth services
- Cultural health/healing services
- Housing services
- Education services
- Local councils/shires
- Income and employment services
- Enterprise and commercial services
- Other NGOs.

## 8. Evaluation

The Children's Ground 25-year evaluation framework has a particular focus on long-term health outcomes for children within the broader context of child, family and community health and wellbeing outcomes.

*Health in the Hands of the People* is informed by, but not constrained by, existing evidence of national and international leading practice. Each element of the Framework is built on a robust evidence base, but we recognise there is limited documentation of integrated methodologies that comprehensively deal with the full extent of complex, culturally-driven and interconnected disadvantage in Australia. Children's Ground seeks to build on a growing evidence base demonstrating what works in these contexts.

Evaluation of *Health in the Hands of the People* is situated within the evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach as a whole. We conduct a 25-year longitudinal evaluation complemented by ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress. Our evaluation is led on the ground by First Nations community researchers and overseen by an expert national Research Advisory Group. In addition to Western research and evaluation methods, we are continually working to understand and apply First Nations approaches.

***"We have been researched to death, we need to research ourselves back to life"***

William Tilmouth, Chair Children's Ground





**“We want our children to be proud of who they are. We want to make sure young people grow up feeling good about themselves as First Nations people, and proud to be part of a community. We are all strong.”**

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children’s Ground)  
Governance Committee, Central Australia