

Children's Ground **Impact Report**

**July-December
2023**



During the second semester of 2023 we continued to celebrate achievements, build hope and keep moving forward on our 25 year journey. It was however, another period of challenge, deep grief and change.. Amongst all the successes and highlights we began and ended the period feeling the deepest sadness as we mourned the loss of more of our Elders. In celebrating them, we paid homage to their profound legacy, and undeniable passion, and the strength, commitment and care they have nurtured amongst our leaders, Elders, young people, staff, supporters and followers.

We celebrated our Chair and First Nations staff who were recognised through the national and local NAIDOC awards for their outstanding leadership. Through leadership like theirs, across the organisation we are seeing the impact of our First Nations practices and systems and we can see the changes in our communities. Our Research and Evaluation team are building a body of evidence that proves our system is working, and this evidence is being recognised at conferences and in discussions around the country.

This period we also saw the Referendum on the Voice to Parliament fail – another moment in our history as a country where the voice of First Nations people was denied. While this was a devastating outcome, the importance of our voice and the power of our voice has long been carrying with us the knowledge of our Elders and our ancestors.

We have worked with Utyerre Apanpe – the First Nations Educators Network and defined a roadmap – articulated in the M.K. Turner Report – for the government to implement a First Nations education system. This roadmap was developed with more than 60 First Nations education experts over several years and sits within an international context and best practice.

We are at a critical time in our growth and our development as this Impact Report details. In a year where we once again experienced deep wounds, we continue to fight for survival and we are more resolved than ever to achieve change.

In the words of 2023 NAIDOC Elder of the Year and Children's Ground Chair, William Tilmouth, *"We are standing on the shoulders of the giants of the past. Due to the struggles of the many people whose shoulders we stand on, we will continue to rise up. Like them we won't give up."*

We are condemned by the lack of forward thinking. Yet we live in hope based on the strengths of our people who got up, stood up and showed up. And on the perseverance and strength of our people standing up today.

This is our journey. This is our destiny."

Thank you for walking with us.



The passing of Mrs. T. Ryder

Mrs. T. Ryder was a strong and unwavering Elder and leader of Children's Ground. She was a leading linguist and our most senior expert and authority in orthography for written Arrernte and for Children's Ground written language resources.

She was also an exceptional and celebrated artist and published author. She recorded the cultural and environmental significance of birds through the region, both painting and recording their significance, and publishing the book *Ayeye thipe-akerte: Arrernte stories about birds* (2017).

As an Elder with Children's Ground, she loved going on Country at every opportunity. Over recent years she hosted the National Network of First Cultural Educators, Utyerre Apanpe, on her Country at Inteye Arrkwe (Ross River).

Mrs. T. Ryder had over forty years of experience as an interpreter and educator. She was a key contributor to the Eastern and Central Arrernte-English Dictionary published in 1994.

She knew that law and culture is where the people and the land will always find their peace and wellbeing.

She knew the power to heal, to learn, and find solutions that are held in language, land and ways of being that have been held by ancestors for time immemorial.

She set the standards for humility, culture, giving, responsibility and care.

Along with Dr M.K. Turner OAM (dec. 2023) and Mrs Palmer (dec. 2021), she generously gifted her knowledge to many, so that it would continue for future generations. Throughout their lives they worried about the loss of culture through loss of language, and promoted standards of excellence and integrity.

Their life's work, passion, and responsibility was ensuring First Language and First Cultural education was revitalised as a right for future generations.

We will forever hold their vision.

In My Blood it Runs book launch

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe welcomed the Mparntwe community to celebrate the launch of the book *In My Blood it Runs*, authored by Djujan Hoosan, Children's Ground Director, C. Turner and Margaret Anderson and illustrated by Archibald Prize winner and Cadigal artist, Blak Douglas.

The children's book is an adaptation of the documentary of the same name, which follows Djujan who is 'failing' at school in Alice Springs, while his family fights to give him a strong Arrernte education alongside his Western schooling. It presents a vision for a different approach to learning, justice for First Nations children and amplifies the determination, strength and love of our families that is often erased from narratives.

At the launch, the ampe (kids) participated in a cloud-drawing workshop with Blak Douglas, followed by traditional Arrernte dancing and powerful speeches from C. Turner with Djujan, Blak Douglas and 2023 NAIDOC Elder of the Year and Chair of Children's Ground, William Tilmouth.

"Werte, arritnye CT ayenge Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe warke-irreme. Djujan kenhe aperle Margaret Anderson re arelhe Garrawa ayenge kenhe arelhe Arrernte."

"We want people to see that our Aboriginal culture is still strong. Djujan has learned a lot and is learning a lot by being on his own Country. We hope people learn to respect our culture, language, and identity."
- C. Turner, co-author of *In My Blood It Runs*

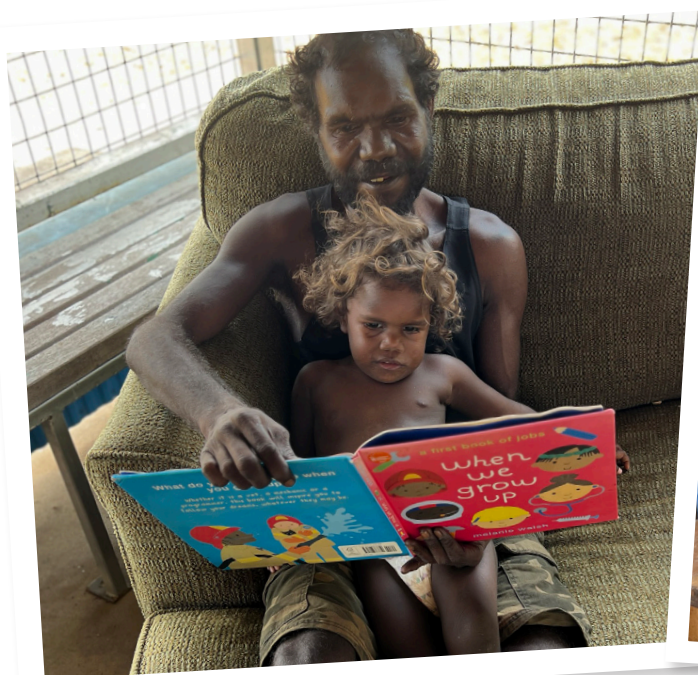


Progress, growth and impact

The Children's Ground Approach (CGA) is being delivered across three regions – Central Australia, Darwin and West Arnhem. Each region is at a different stage of the 25-year Approach which is detailed below. The development and growth in delivery is dependent on available resources. The graph below presents % of delivery against the full CGA by the end of Semester Two 2023 as well as our resource and growth targets for the next five years.

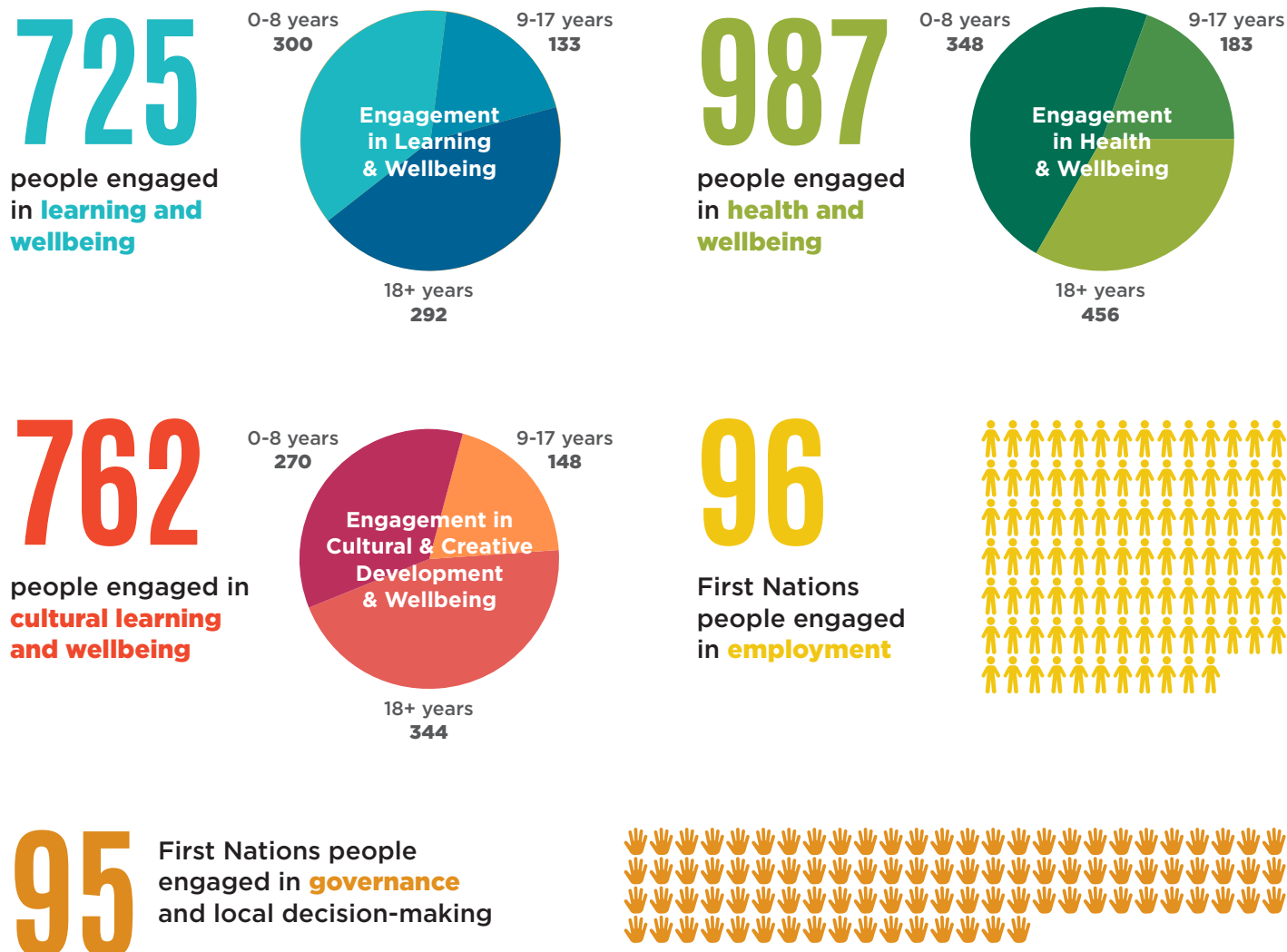


Note: Delivery of the full CG Approach is early years and primary aged learning including after hours and specialist opportunities e.g. sport, music, arts; health and wellbeing, employment, enterprise, community development – all delivered in community, culturally centred and locally governed.



Progress, growth and impact

The CGA delivers across five key integrated service platforms: Learning and Wellbeing, Family Health and Wellbeing, Economic Development and Wellbeing, Community Development and Wellbeing, and Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing



There has been a steady increase in engagement over the last 12 months. However, this pattern is slowing as our reach has increased across community. While the numbers of participants is expected to plateau in some communities in Central Australia in coming years, growth will continue through a focus on service quality.

In the second semester of 2023, we saw:

- a steady number of children and families engaged in Learning and Wellbeing, compared with the first semester.
- an increase in the number of people engaged in universal and targeted health promotion and support.
- a sustained First Nations employment and engagement in regional and community governance between semester one 2023 semester two 2023.
- a pleasing and anticipated increase in the number of children, young people and adults engaged in Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing.



Learning and Wellbeing

Western learning, especially numeracy and literacy, is so important for our children. However, learning for First Nations children goes beyond just this; our learning system is embedded in culture and is about building strong and confident First Nations people who are proud in their identity. This gives them the foundations to thrive.

We finished the semester of learning with end of year gatherings in each community, where the ampe and wurdurd were celebrated and received their learning reports from their educators. The children love receiving these and sharing their achievements and progress with their families. In Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, 109 children received reports!

First year of place-based learning at Mpweringke Anapipe

Alongside our Early Years delivery in Central Australia, this year saw the inaugural delivery of targeted primary age learning in the Mpweringke Anapipe region. Through an exciting partnership with Yipirinya School, primary students from Mpweringke (Burt Creek) are now learning two days a week in their homeland and on their Country. With a focus on both cultural and western learning, by partnering with Yipirinya School, we are beginning to realise the vision of our Elders - establishing schooling on homelands north of Alice Springs.

IMPACT:

The first year of primary education at Mpweringke is an important milestone for Children's Ground and our community. Establishing learning for school-aged children to learn both ways on their own Country, has been the vision of our Elders. Children can now progress through early-years learning into primary aged learning through their own culture and language and on country, while progressing in their Western education.

At Mpweringke Anapipe, parents, carers and family lead their children's educational journeys, joining them at sessions and providing support for children to feel safe and comfortable. Nakita has supported her daughter by attending 54 Early Learning sessions. Nakita brings Shaznaya along, setting her learning goals, planning her learning and helping to write stories of her personal growth. Nakita knows Shaznaya best, having a mother's deep connection with her child she attends and knows what Shaznaya's needs are, what her kinship responsibilities are and what cultural knowledge is necessary for her to grow up strong. As Nakita attends planning, she works alongside Western educators to plan activities catered to Shaznaya's developmental needs.

IMPACT:

First Nations education systems centre children within their familial relationships. Having family engaged in children's learning is essential for a child's success. Family participation directly impacts a child's engagement, enthusiasm, progress and learning. Family interest in educational outcomes sets children up for lifelong learning and success.



Children's Ground Approach in action

Re-engaging Youth at 15 Mile Community

Early in 2023, Children's Ground leaders in the 15 Mile Community in Darwin raised concerns about the low school involvement and engagement of their school-aged children. Early Years staff further emphasised their worry, noting the increase in interest in these school-aged children in attending Children's Ground early years sessions rather than school. As a result, Children's Ground staff and community leaders devised a strategy to involve disengaged young people from 15 Mile in learning. Through collaboration with Howard Springs Primary School, we established an afterhours learning program to occur in community, each afternoon. Howard Springs Primary School provided learning activities and materials for Children's Ground staff to engage the children. This collaboration with local schools and participation in the afterhours learning program activities led to an increase in school attendance among these previously disengaged young people. Three of them completed primary school by the end of 2023 and enrolled in the local College to further their education in 2024.

IMPACT:

The leaders and families of 15 Mile are creating First Nations-led solutions to re-engage young people who are struggling to attend school. These solutions are having an impact. They have created culturally safe programs that are suited to them, building their confidence, and helping them to feel motivated and supported in their education.



Children's Ground Approach in action



Health and Wellbeing

Children's Ground's Family Health and Wellbeing Framework includes delivery and focus not just on the physical, but also the cultural, social, emotional and environmental health needs of our children and their families. Below are some key milestones that highlight the Children's Ground Approach in improving health and wellbeing.

Speech pathology at Ampe-kenhe Ahele

This semester, 8 of 11 speech pathology assessments were completed for young NDIS participants in Alice Springs. Many of our children require specialised assessment and treatment. Speech pathologists in Alice Springs currently have waitlists of more than 12 months, so to meet this challenge, a Speech Pathologist from Early Start was flown in from Darwin to address this issue.

Language and social communication assessments and paediatric feedings were completed to determine each child's speech pathology needs. This included data collection through informal interviews with family members, sound assessments, classroom observations and lots of play therapy. Knowing English was not the first language for these kids, the speech pathologist recorded storytelling in language, to be used as a baseline for future assessments.

Working together: ear checks on community

First Nations children have high rates of permanent hearing loss due to ear infections. Without proper treatment, children can experience ongoing detrimental effects that affect many domains in life. Kids can struggle to engage in learning, communication, and may be unable to access culture and language.

We partnered with Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (Congress) to tackle hearing health in Central Australia. Congress supported the Ampe-kenhe Ahele nurse to deliver hearing tests and ear health with children in our Early Years sessions. Taking health into community and involving families is critical in preventing chronic hearing issues and ensuring our children have a great start to life and learning.

IMPACT:

By integrating health promotion into learning sessions we are building agency for families to manage their own health, through accessibility and knowledge building. Family health is strengthening as we build and develop relationships with health workers and other important stakeholders, creating an environment of ongoing care and support. When health promotion or specialist health visits occurs on sessions, more family members can be present thereby increasing health knowledge across a family as well as better opportunities for shared health understanding about a child's condition amongst family members. The Top End Health team has also developed partnerships with healthcare providers like Danila Dilba Health Services (DDHS) and HAPEE Ears who have been attending community sessions. Integrating check-ups and specialised care at learning sessions also improves access to care for those who need it and introduces a stronger understanding of how to take care of personal health, preventing future health issues.



Children's Ground Approach in action



Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing

Cultural Development and Wellbeing is embedded across all areas of the Children's Ground Approach; in learning, health, employment and community development. Through cultural systems of learning and development, children develop creative thinking with flexible and adaptive skills which will enable them to engage in a global environment with confidence, while continuing to strengthen and uphold identity, cultural knowledge, language and law.

Anwerne-ke, Ampe-ke: For us, for Children – Central Australia

First Nations linguists and artists create language resources in Central and Eastern Arrernte, Luritja and Western Arrarnta. This includes crafting multilingual educational resources through intergenerational workshops, including books, flashcards and music, with plans to make them accessible through print, audio, and digital platforms. In the Plenty Hwy region they are also creating resources in Akarre/Akityarre.

After launching the first single 'Tyerrtye Atyinhe' (My Body) earlier in the year, we held the official music launch of the full album "Ampe-mape Alyelheme (Kids Sing)" in August. The songs were released internationally, accompanied by a video clip and USB handed out at the public event in Mparntwe. This is the very first children's Arrernte language album and was written by long-time educators and first-time musicians from Children's Ground with a helping hand from Harry Angus, previously from the Cat Empire and Emily Lubitz from Tinpan Orange.

This music and language resource is increasing visibility and accessibility of First Nations language and has reached hundreds of First Nation families and thousands of listeners nationally and internationally.

IMPACT:

Representation of first language in learning resources and recreational materials has immense positive impacts on children, as well as supporting the preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage. The World Bank in their paper, 'Loud and Clear' recognised the critical importance of learning through First Language as well as the critical need to develop language resources to enable quality education in First Language. The ongoing effects of the music program have been profound, resulting in strengthened language development, upskilling of educators, families and the community as well as a huge sense of pride. The resource development created employment opportunities for Elders, Indigenous linguists, and senior language workers.





Economic Development and Wellbeing

In Semester 2 of 2023, 96 First Nations staff members were employed at Children's Ground across all of the platforms and service areas of the CGA. We are seeing the beginning of a strong and sustainable workforce in each of the regions in which we work - one of the key visions of our organisation.

In Central Australia, 34% of First Nations staff had never had a job before starting at Children's Ground and 84% were not working at the time of employment (2017-2019 Children's Ground Ampe-kenhe Ahele Evaluation Report).

Children's Ground Approach featured at conferences

Over this period we were proud to showcase the Children's Ground Approach at a number of conferences. The Top End team were invited to contribute to the Indigenous Wellbeing Conference, presenting to both national and international delegations from 30 - 31 October in Garramilla (Darwin). This underscored the team's dedication to sharing Indigenous wellbeing practices globally, contributing to the broader discourse on holistic wellbeing. We were also nominated for an NT Community Achievement Award.

Cherisse Buzzacott (Head of Health and Wellbeing, Central Australia) and Amunda Gorey (First Nations Research Officer, Central Australia) presented the Maternal Child Health Cultural Research Framework at SNAICC 2023 in Garramilla.

The presentation on the research titled 'Arelhe ante areyele arntarnte-arelhetyeke ampe akweke arle atnyenetyenheke - Women guiding women who are going to have babies' was conducted by First Nations women from Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme, First Nations Governance.

Cultural mapping on Maternal Child Health was seen as a priority for the continuation of culture and the strengthening of practices, as well as sharing knowledge with little ones and youth to better empower their journey to long and healthy pregnancies and healthy babies.





Community Development and Wellbeing

Becoming place-based in 15 Mile and Knuckey Lagoon – Top End

Thanks to the effort of our community leaders, 15 Mile and Knuckey Lagoon in the Top End have become place-based. Over the past three years, we have worked consistently to revive community centres in both areas which were unused and inactive. These centres are now spaces for learning, health, and community gatherings.

In an effort to boost community engagement with these new spaces, leaders from the 15 Mile community and staff from Children's Ground used a traffic light system to categorise households based on their engagement with community programs: those actively engaged (green), those potentially interested (amber), and those less likely to engage (red). Following this, we brainstormed tactics to maintain the involvement of the 'green' households, devised approaches to engage the 'amber' households, and subsequently targeted the 'red' households once progress was made with the 'amber' ones.

Community leaders began implementing activities that fostered relationship building in more targeted ways, such as establishing a young women's group, hosting bi-weekly community events such as breakfast cook-ups and gatherings, and creating an after-hours homework support group to engage young people, regardless of their current school involvement.

With the support of Children's Ground, community leaders have also begun building relationships with other service providers in the area. We now host regular bi-monthly inter-agency collaboration meetings so community can take the lead on their needs and what services would benefit the community.

IMPACT:

Families at 15 Mile and Knuckey Lagoon are empowered and have created a dedicated space that responds to their needs and aspirations and is led and used by community. The space, together with the above initiatives, has fostered a greater sense of community confidence in participating in Children's Ground programs, resulting in members of each household attending at least one of the programs on offer. The community hall has emerged as a safe and welcoming space for all community members to come together, to have access to services, and experience agency over their own wellbeing.



Children's Ground Approach in action

Working with Marlkawo community

The families of Marlkawo in West Arnhem have continued to sustain the delivery of a small homeland version of the Children's Ground Approach. Sustaining education has ongoing challenges for remote communities like Marlkawo during the wet season when access to homelands is restricted. During this time it is costly to travel into homelands, it is difficult to access healthcare and it is costly to manage food security.

This semester, Children's Ground and Bolmo families conducted a review on delivery and planning, following the impact of sorry business each year for the past three years. We reviewed operations, leadership and logistics and discussed the movements of families between their outstation and larger towns. Bolmo families want to maintain their connections to their Homeland, Marlkawo, and ensure their children grow up strong in Culture and identity. However due to a range of obstacles including health and transport, it is difficult for some people to reside there permanently. Others wish to remain in Marlkawo and others want to visit during the dry season.

Through this review, they have decided that in 2024 there will be an intensive focus on dry season delivery rather than an all-year delivery model

IMPACT:

Local leadership is critical to service design and efficiency. The Bolmo families had not lived permanently on their country for many years, before returning in 2018 with the support of Children's Ground. At that time there were two broken down unlivable houses and little infrastructure. Each year families have been impacted by significant family death and leaders moving to Darwin due to health issues. However, despite these changes, families have built their outstation into a viable and wonderful environment for children and families. This review shows the importance of community-led design and development, as well as the importance of flexibility in response to changing realities, while ensuring delivery remains viable and meaningful. Community realities are impacted by health, sorry business, financial capacity and choice by families. By being flexible, we can respond to the changing realities and create effective and responsive delivery that best supports children and families with the focus on quality learning, culture, wellbeing, local leadership and long term economic development.



Children's Ground recognises the history of First Nations people being the subjects rather than leaders of research about them in different forms since colonisation. Children's Ground uses a participatory approach, with research and evaluation conducted by First Nations people with First Nations families, working alongside non-First Nations staff with western research qualifications. In this way First Nations people are at the centre of research, in design, execution and analysis and communication.

Research partnership with The Remedy Project

Since 2022, Children's Ground has partnered with The Remedy Project (remedyproject.org) to research 'First Nations Music as a Determinant of Health'.

The project honours the historical role of music as a cultural remedy in First Nations healing and ceremony, and reflects the resolute strength of First Nations musical practices despite ongoing colonisation.

The Remedy team have epitomised how research can and should be undertaken with First Nations people. Children's Ground's First Nations researchers and leaders are involved in all levels of research, from approving the projects approach, to informing yarning questions and surveys, to undertaking and supporting data collection, data analysis and collaboratively presenting findings at the 2023 Lowitja Indigenous Health & Wellbeing Conference.

In 2023, The Remedy Project research team, including current and former community researchers from Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia), was awarded the 2023 Griffith University Pro Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor's awards for Research Excellence in a team.

The award recognises the team enacting leading principles for First Nations research, transforming research practices, creating new spaces for Indigenist and creative arts-health research at Griffith University and participating organisations.

The team recently published an article titled '*Promoting First Nations Sovereignty in Community-Engaged Research: Yarning and Relationship Building with Children's Ground in Central Australia*'. The team will continue to collaborate and share research findings on the value of First Nations music for health, wellbeing, and healing.



Children's Ground evaluation workshop

In September, members of Children's Ground's Research & Evaluation team facilitated a successful full day workshop at the Australian Evaluation Society Conference.

Amunda Gorey and Veronica Doolan (Arrernte First Nations researchers), and Jen Lorains (non-First Nations researcher) shared how Children's Ground is working to ensure not just First Nations data sovereignty, but also First Nations ownership and sovereignty in all research and evaluation about, and with, First Nations people.

The workshop shared the strengths, successes and challenges of doing evaluation with, and by, First Nations communities. The delegation received overwhelmingly positive feedback about the workshop.

Kiri Parata, President of the Australian Evaluation Society, chaired the workshop. She reflected:

"You shared examples of best practice when describing the work of Children's Ground... You did this with such grace and humility. Many of the principles and values and the way in which you work seem natural, and the right way to do things from an Indigenous perspective. It seems we could all learn and apply these values in our everyday life, in our homes, in our workplaces, with our communities... You provided us with hope for change in Australia."



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