

# Summary: Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Children's Ground in Central Australia 2020 to 2022





Wonderful

CAAC

21

Voices

Anwerne apmere-ke ahentye aneme ampe akweke anwerne-kenhe areye mwerre anetyeke. Itne amagketyeke rlterrke, akaltye irremele educationeke, ante future mwerre atnyenetyeke Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe apmere mwerre itne aneme. Anwerne areme ampe anwerne-kenhe areye akaltye irrerlenge. Itneke artweye mape itneke itwerle akarelheme. Anwerne ahentye aneme itne mwerre akwete anetyeke.

We want a place where our children are safe—where they can grow up to be healthy, educated and have a better future. Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe is the place for them. We are seeing our kids learning and loving to learn. Their families are walking beside them. We have hope for the future.

Akaltye-le anthentye-nenhe the anteme akweke ingkernenye mape-ke itne itelaretyeke.

We are leaving this for the younger generations to learn and remember.

## Acknowledgments

### **The vision of Children’s Ground came from Arrernte Elders in Central Australia.**

Children’s Ground would like to acknowledge and thank all the Elders, children, leaders, families and communities of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children’s Ground Central Australia) who own and hold the long-term vision, and who govern, lead, work and participate every day to make that vision a reality for future generations.

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe is held by our Elders. Over the past six years, Children’s Ground staff, both First Nations and non-First Nations, have undertaken an apprenticeship under these Elders. The next generation are now stepping into their role as Elders.

Children’s Ground would also like to acknowledge and thank all the passionate and dedicated staff and volunteers who have worked alongside families in Central Australia to continue growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.

We sincerely thank our national Research Advisory Group for their support and guidance. Your contributions to the analysis of data, findings and outcomes has been invaluable.

Children’s Ground wishes to thank our family of community, philanthropic, corporate and government funding partners and supporters. Your vision and support provided the ongoing space for innovation and systems reform led by First Nations leaders, families and community members across Central Australia.

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

**Summary: Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe Children’s Ground in Central Australia 2020 to 2022**

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## ABOUT

### **Children's Ground**

Children's Ground is a First Nations not-for-profit organisation dedicated to creating systemic and enduring change through First Nations design and leadership.

Children's Ground focuses on outcomes to achieve long-term sustained change, so that children, families and whole communities can thrive.

The organisation aims to uplift entire communities and future generations, to create a stronger, more empowered future where First Nations people are leading change.

## ABOUT

### **Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground in Central Australia)**

Children's Ground operates in different First Nations communities in the Northern Territory (NT), recognising and respecting the unique leadership of each nation and community.

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe is the Arrernte (local Aboriginal language) translation for Children's Ground Central Australia.

# Community voices of empowerment and change.



“

**Children’s Ground gave me an opportunity to be a leader and join in, be part of Children’s Ground. I’m really happy. And it makes me want to speak out. I want to tell them about this place... To go out and see with the kids. With everyone. This place, Children’s Ground, is generational.**

”

*40-50 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

“

**Children’s Ground was developed because there wasn’t any language and culture happening in schools anymore... [Now] we are teaching language and culture side by side with western, but it’s just as important if not more. And to be strong in western, you’ve got to be strong in your culture and language.**

”

*35-45 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*



“

**It makes me feel proud [being at Children’s Ground] and it makes me want to better myself and that means better myself as a person and as a human being. Better myself as a colleague, as a friend, as a sister, as a family member, as a mother. I’ve grown a lot in this last two years that I’ve been at Children’s Ground.**

”

*35-45 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*





“

**I've seen a change in people's lives... Some young fellas don't do the stuff what they used to do all the time, because now they've got a job, and they get up in the morning and come to Children's Ground. And that's exactly what I'm doing.** ”

*35-45 years, Male, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

“

**It's a place where they [children] feel comfortable, not in schools, but where they're involved with their families and communities.** ”

*65+ years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*



“

**It's made me stronger. Stronger lady and I can look back to my kids and my grandkids and where I can be with them. It's been really good. Last four years, I feel really strong with Children's Ground.** ”

*45-55 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

“

**[Before Children's Ground] I had no job. I was on drugs, didn't bother look for a job because I was so addicted. Then one day CG came. That's when I gave up everything... Now I'm better than ever. [Being on Country] opens up your mind. Clears your mind being out bush. Teaching kids what you know. Changes a lot in a person.** ”

*30-40, Male, First Nations staff/family member, 2022*



“

**It [Children's Ground] changed my life too. Because before I didn't have that job. I used to drink all the time.** ”

*50-60 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

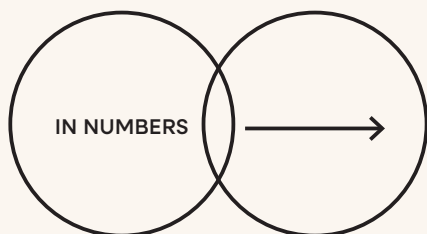
“

**Children's Ground is important for little ones. When they come, they feel happy, yeah, they don't want to be just sitting back home and doing nothing.** ”

*25-35 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

# Children's Ground progress and impact – a snapshot.

The evaluation shows that, while much work remains, the CG Approach is achieving outcomes critical to the long-term wellbeing of children and families in communities where complex disadvantage and injustice is endemic.



# 1,415

people engaged in the CG Approach from 2020 to 2022, an increase from 978 in 2017 to 2019.

## 14% → 68%

A 57% increase in the percentage of children aged 0-5 years engaging in early years learning. At the beginning of Children's Ground, only 14% of children had previously engaged in early years learning. Now, 68% of children are engaged in early learning with Children's Ground.

## 73%

The proportion of children 0-8 years from Children's Ground communities who engaged with the CG Approach in learning, health, first language, culture and family and community activities.

## 452

Children aged 0-8 years engaged in nutrition nearly doubled, with a 98% increase from 228 children in 2017 to 2019.

## 83

Number of local First Nations people employed between 2020 to 2022. 71% weren't employed when they started working with Children's Ground. Of those who had worked before, 83% had not worked in the past 12 months or more. 31% of staff had never worked in paid employment before Children's Ground.

## 111%

Increase in the number of people (all ages) engaged in cultural learning and wellbeing across Children's Ground communities since 2017 to 19, rising from 315 to 666 people.

## 87%

Proportion of people (n=23) in Children's Ground communities reporting that families are "walking alongside their children" (engaging with and supporting them).

## 197

Number of people engaged in First Nations community and regional governance and decision-making – an 84% increase from 107 people in 2017 to 2019.



**Data shows that the stronger children are in cultural**



**learning, the stronger they are in Western learning.**

# What is the Children's Ground Approach and how does it work?

The Children's Ground Approach is a 25-year strategy focused on creating lasting change led by First Nations communities.



The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is a new system design that centres First Nations systems of knowledge and expertise and combines them with western leading practice and international evidence.

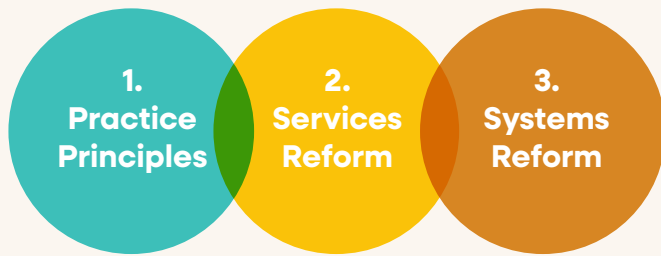
Local leadership is the cornerstone, with the approach governed, designed, delivered and evaluated by local First Nations communities.

As an evidence-based approach, it offers a responsive integrated services system that combines culture, education, health, employment, community and economic development, tailored to the specific needs of communities. It is a 25-year strategy that starts with children, their family and whole community, and it grows with children and their families through to adulthood. As a whole-of-community approach, it addresses the key social, cultural and economic determinants to ensure children and their families can enjoy a life of opportunity.

The CG Approach is a preventative strategy aimed at achieving lifelong wellbeing and ending intergenerational inequity, exclusion and complex disadvantage. Recognising that transformative change takes time, the CG Approach prioritises long-term investment and commitment.

This Approach aspires to achieve excellence, recognising that children, families and communities who need the most, deserve the best. This can only be achieved by ensuring that First Nations communities shape their own futures. The long-term vision is to evidence a system that empowers local communities to achieve sustained change for future generations.

The Children’s Ground Approach is made up of three key components:



Each of these is expanded in Figure 1 at the bottom of this page. **The CG Approach has five integrated Service Reform areas, depicted in Figure 1 as yellow bars.** These are the services that Children’s Ground delivers in each community. The goal of the CG Approach is to ensure that First Nations children and families have access to each of these services through a culturally responsive design.

**These services must be delivered in alignment with the ten Practice Principles, represented in Figure 1 by blue circles.** Each principle is recognised by First Nations and western evidence as critical to achieving change.

It is the principles as a whole that create the conditions for change. They guide and shape how Children’s Ground works. (See page 46 for information on each Practice Principle.)

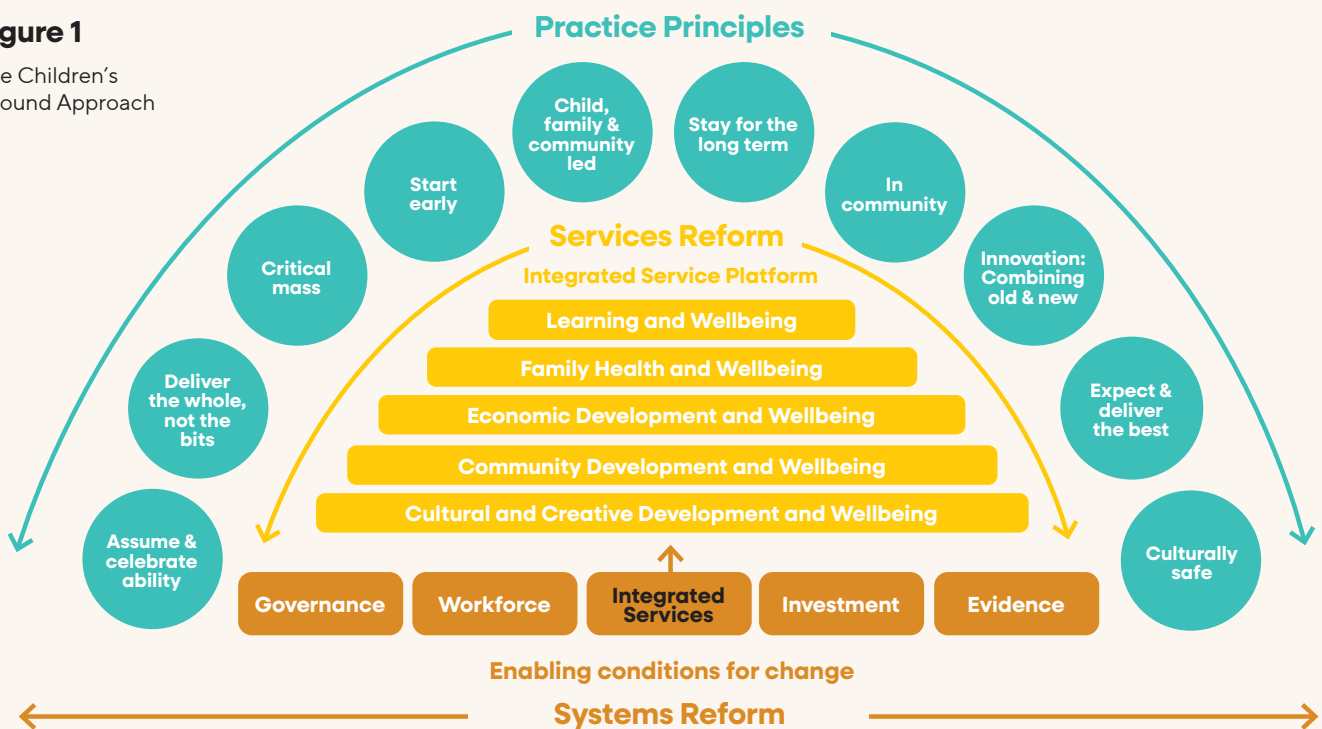
**At the base of Figure 1 is Systems Reform, represented by orange blocks.** These blocks are the foundational elements necessary for driving change in both System and Service Reform.

The most important aspect of the CG Approach is its interdependent design, consistent with First Nations service and knowledge systems. Each of its three components – Practice Principles, Services Reform and Systems Reform – rely on the others to be effective.

The CG Approach ensures each community to design, deliver and govern systems and services according to their unique needs and cultural and community contexts. The CG Approach begins with the community, building relationships, empowerment and places of safety. These foundations are necessary for fostering participation, voice and agency over time.

**Figure 1**

The Children’s Ground Approach



# About this evaluation



This report is the second evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children’s Ground Central Australia), evaluating the delivery of the Children’s Ground Approach in four communities between 2020 to 2022. It builds on the first evaluation from 2017 to 2019, and presents outcomes for the same four communities:



## Evaluation outcomes frameworks: using western & First Nations lenses

This evaluation prioritises data and evaluation sovereignty. It has been undertaken by both western evaluators and First Nations evaluators, in line with key research and evaluation principles developed with First Nations leaders. The evaluation approach mitigates (but does not fully remove) the risk of cultural bias, cultural assumptions, analysis and language that can contribute to ongoing harm and colonisation, too often seen in research.<sup>1 2</sup>

1 Luke J, Verbunt E, Zhang A, et al. Questioning the ethics of evidence-based practice for Indigenous health and social settings in Australia. *BMJ Global Health* 2022;7:e009167. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009167  
2 Dawson, A. S., Toombs, E., Mushquash, C. J. (2017). Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2). DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.5





# About the Arrernte evaluation framework

In 2011, Arrernte leaders articulated the CG Approach and outcomes in the following painting. The Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance Group) uses this painting in its analysis of progress and impact of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.

Understanding each of its parts and how they intersect will provide insight into the framework's holistic methodology and its effectiveness in driving positive change.

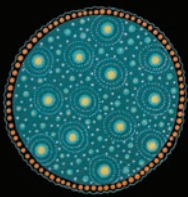
**Figure 2**

Cultural Evaluation Framework

Painting design by Jane Davis, painted by Amunda Gorey (2011).  
Painting interpretation by Jane Davis and Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance Group).



## What the shapes represent



### Four outer circles

Children who have graduated from Children's Ground. Now as adults, they have real choices and opportunities. Each circle is a choice, an option – work, study, family, leadership. Their footprints always come back to Country. They know where they belong.



### White lines

White lines connect everything and all of us. We are standing strong for our children, and our communities strengthen for everyone. We continue learning and growing forever.



### Black spaces

Where we all work together. Because everything and everyone is connected to the land. Where our Country stops, someone else's starts. It's also about working with people outside of Children's Ground, sharing what we are doing with other communities.



### Little half circles facing out

Our funders and partners. They have their backs towards the centre to show that they are not controlling us but supporting us. Their funding/support is coming into the community, and we give back information about what is happening in our communities.



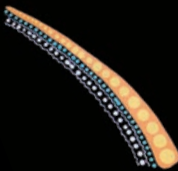
### Footprints

Footprints show everyone interacting with each other. They return to our Country, and we create them with our children so they can build the life they want. They show Children's Ground operating in the community, the home and the bush.



### Little curved shapes

People. The larger shapes are Elders, the smaller ones are children. The old people stand behind the younger ones, leading them. When babies are born, they are in the middle. We are all responsible for each child.



### Blue and white dots and yellow curves

The knowledge, made up of First Nations language and culture and western language and culture. With this, children learn everything they need for their health and spirit.



### Star-like shapes (middle)

A fire with people sitting around it. Elders are teaching, and families are sharing culture and showing children who they are, where they come from and where they belong.



### Four blue half circles with people

The Children's Ground communities. They are within their traditional lands, but they are together too. We connect within our communities and with other communities, bringing everyone together, leading Children's Ground for our children.



### Semi-circles

These represent our home (ilthe/apmere): our land, Country and community.

**“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.”**

# About the western evaluation framework

The western evaluation framework for Children's Ground outlines a 25-year longitudinal strategy designed to measure the effectiveness of the CG Approach. This framework specifies a total of ten long-term **outcomes** for children (4 outcomes), families (3) and communities (3). These outcomes align with the systemic design of Children's Ground that requires impact and change across a range of key determinants to achieve generational change. These outcomes align with the Arrernte evaluation framework and are shown in Figure 3, along with corresponding **aspirations**: the overarching goal and desired future for each group (children, families and communities).



Each outcome has dedicated progress indicators to track changes and impacts over the 25-year period. Outcomes for children are expected to develop throughout these 25 years, while family and community outcomes are expected to be achieved as this generation of children become parents and working-age adults.

## Evaluation Method

**Data collection to inform this evaluation includes:**

**Children's Ground administrative activity and participation data representing 1415 First Nations people, including 468 children 0-8 years, 272 young people 9-17 years and 675 adult family members.**

**Evaluation interviews and focus groups with 28 First Nations staff/family members; 13 western-trained staff; 6 local service providers.**

**Anonymous surveys with 35 Children's Ground staff (18 First Nations and 17 non-First Nations); 7 local service providers.**

**Family/Community baseline survey with 202 First Nations adult community members.**

**Child Learning & Wellbeing tool, completed by cultural and western-trained educators for 45 children 3-7 years.**

**Figure 3**

Western Evaluation Framework

<b>Aspirations</b>	<b>Outcomes<sup>3</sup></b>			
<p><b>Children are thriving - engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities.</b></p>	<p><b>Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers.</b></p>	<p><b>Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures.</b></p>	<p><b>Children are healthy.</b></p>	<p><b>Children are happy.</b></p>
<p><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.</b></p>	<p><b>Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development.</b></p>	<p><b>Families are economically strong.</b></p>	<p><b>Families are healthy and socially strong.</b></p>	
<p><b>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></p>	<p><b>The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural, social and economic wellbeing.</b></p>	<p><b>The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity.</b></p>	<p><b>The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity.</b></p>	

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation has ethics approval from the NT Human Research Ethics. The evaluation method, data analysis and report have been oversighted by Children's Ground's independent National Research Advisory Group, which consists of experts in academic, community and systems research and evaluation.

See the Research Advisory Group's endorsement of this evaluation report on page 68.

“There’s a lot of value in research. The more we know about ourselves, the stronger we are going to be. Because we don’t want western researchers coming in and being experts on our lives. We want to be the experts on our lives, and we can do that in two worlds.”

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

<sup>3</sup> In 2023, Children's Ground separated the long-term outcome of 'Families are socially and economically strong' to become two family-level outcomes. These outcomes are: 'Families are economically strong' and 'Families are healthy and socially strong'.

## The Road To Now.

The Children's Ground Approach is a unique and radical 25-year strategy focusing on lasting change. It starts with children pre-birth to eight years and grows with them and their families through to adulthood.

Occurs in a community wanting to deliver the CG Approach. This phase introduces Children's Ground and the CG Approach, and introduces key concepts like governance, leadership and financial capacity, while ensuring the CG Approach is both wanted by the community and viable. Engagement is led by local people, with a family-by-family approach, incorporating early learning and cultural and community activities. Results in a five-year community plan subject to community and organisational approval.

Establishing local leadership, governance, intergenerational centres and employment for CG Approach implementation. Increase equity in and access to learning and health services, employment and local decision-making by implementing the CG Approach. Build relationships with children and families and increase engagement over time. Strengthen and amplify First Nations knowledge systems and practices. Create environments of safety and inclusion in all Children's Ground environments, led by each community.



**Beginnings -  
Walk, Talk & Act,  
community planning  
& engagement**

**6-18 MONTHS**



**Establishing  
the  
CG Approach**

**1-3 YEARS**

**25 YEAR IMPLEMENTATION**

**Figure 4**

The CG Approach's 25-year delivery and progress phases

Growing engagement and wellbeing. A majority of children and families are now engaging in early learning, health and community activities. Community governance and employment strengthens. Children are progressing in cultural and Western learning. Primary school learning is established. Children's Ground is a safe place, governed strongly by communities. A new normal is emerging for children and families in learning, health, cultural, social, emotional and economic wellbeing.



### A new norm emerging

We are here: YEAR 6

4-10 YEARS

### Change and consolidation



Consolidating change for the next generation. Broad community engagement in governance. Increased consistency in local community employment. Secondary school learning is established. Educational outcomes for children and young people in cultural and Western learning are at community and national standards. Children and young people's health and wellbeing continues to improve. Family economic wellbeing improving through employment and enterprise. Community safety, cohesion, life and opportunity continue to improve.

11-20 YEARS

### Sustainability



Equity, opportunity and wellbeing are the new normal for the next generation of children, young people, families and the majority of people in communities. Young people become adults with independent incomes, positive learning and health outcomes, and local and global opportunities. Communities live and celebrate cultural, social and economic strength.

20-25 YEARS + ONGOING

**OF FULL CHILDREN'S GROUND APPROACH →**

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

After many decades of work and leadership among First Nations people in Central Australia, the CG Approach was designed, then incubated by the Australian Government as a model of innovation. Implementation efforts first began in 2011-12 through a 'Walk and Talk' engagement model in Alice Springs with Uyenpere Atwatye (Hidden Valley Town Camp) and Yarrenyty Arltere (Larapinta Valley Town Camp).

Although there was strong community support, the initiative stalled due to lack of Government funding. In late 2015, Arrernte Elders urgently requested Children's Ground return, leading to the establishment of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia) and the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Governance Group) in 2016. This marked the beginning of a planned 25-year approach. In 2017, under the direction of founding Elders, CG Approach operations commenced in Irrkerlantye (Whitegate Town Camp), Yarrenyty Arltere and Mpweringke Anapipe (a group of outstations/homelands north of Alice Springs), then Uyenpere Atwatye (in 2019).

At the time Children's Ground did not have the financial resources to deliver the full CG Approach. Elders, First Nations governance members and Children's Ground's Board agreed to a small 'growth model' that could evolve and grow towards the full model as resources increased.

## The Growth Model: A step towards the full CG Approach



The growth model is an incremental strategy implemented by Children's Ground in 2017. Unlike the full CG Approach, which requires adequate resourcing to provide the suite of services and supports required to change the future for the current generation of children, the growth model evolves and expands as funding increases, delivering as much as possible within each area of the CG Approach.

This adaptive model allows for gradual development and aims to secure additional funding over time to eventually implement the full CG Approach. This method ensures continuous progress and resource allocation aligned with available financial support.

Within the 'growth model', from 2017 to 2022, Children's Ground focused its efforts on establishing organisational capability and operations, engaging children and families in early learning, developing First Nations governance and employing local First Nations people. Key priorities included achieving cultural safety, establishing service systems, standards, access and equity and building engagement.

Under the growth model, the rollout of the CG Approach had to be managed in proportion to actual and projected income, with systems evolving to support new delivery platforms.

The focus of implementation included building and consolidating equitable access and engagement as the foundation for 25 years of delivery. Figure 4 shows the CG Approach's 25-year delivery and progress phases. This evaluation period covers years 4-6 of CG Approach implementation.





While Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe has been operational for six years, the progress phase timeframe has extended due to the growth model.

Although these unavoidable constraints and the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges, Children's Ground has made significant strides in creating a 'new normal' for children and families within the communities leading Children's Ground.

This evaluation outlines the extent of progress made in Central Australia from 2020 to 2022, while noting that full implementation of the CG Approach over 25 years is necessary for sustained long-term impact and change.

“We have governance, which is where decisions and questions are brought to governance, and I think it empowers people, it's giving you that voice and knowing that you do have one.”

*30-40 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

## The Impact of COVID-19 on the Evaluation

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected delivery of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe throughout the evaluation period of 2020 to 2022, impacting engagement and development of the CG Approach in key areas, while also showing the strength of the responsive and flexible design of the approach.

# Introduction to key findings: Children, Families and Community

This section presents key impact and process findings from the evaluation, measured against the evaluation frameworks for children, families and communities, illustrating how the CG Approach is tracking against its objectives to meet long-term outcomes.



THIS SECTION RESPONDS TO THESE KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS:



**Q.**  
Impact findings:

What progress occurred towards longer term impact against the evaluation outcomes?

**Q.**  
Process findings:

Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended? (in the context of a 'growth model', compared to the full CG Approach.)

**Q.**  
Systems change analysis:

What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and any early progress towards impact?

What contribution has been made towards broader systems reform?

“That’s the next generations for the ampe [children]. They’re the ones can hold the land, apmere, and they’ll be there all the time for their kids and their kids, generation to generation.”

*65+ years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*



# Key findings: Change and impact for Children



## Aspiration: Children are thriving, engaged with life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities.



The early years of a person's life, defined as children 0-8 years, are crucial for development and lifelong wellbeing. Adverse experiences during this period are linked to significant health, economic and social risks in later life.<sup>4</sup> Positive early childhood experiences and opportunity have profound and lasting impacts on a child's future.

Many First Nations children in Australia face greater challenges than non-First Nations children, with the 2024 Closing the Gap data showing poorer outcomes in health, education and safety, particularly in the NT, where only 16% of First Nations children are developmentally on track when they start school.<sup>5</sup>

To achieve the stated aspiration for children, Children's Ground has identified key outcome areas, listed in the following pages. The evaluation framework tracks the progress of children across these outcomes.



4 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.

5 Public Health Information Development Unit (PHIDU), Torrens University Australia. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Social Health Atlas of Australia (online). June 2024 release. <https://phidu.torrens.edu.au/social-health-atlases/data#aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-social-health-atlas-of-australia-indigenous-areas>.

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

Children's Ground's Learning & Wellbeing framework is designed to support the development, wellbeing and learning of children from birth to adulthood. This intergenerational model encompasses social, cultural, cognitive, creative, physical and emotional development, integrating both first language and culture with English and western skills and knowledge.

*“It was a fresh start for my kids. And for me to be involved in other family in Children's Ground. I was really amazed to see how the kids – outdoor, they have their own classroom in the outdoors.”*

35-45 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

## Key findings:

- 1. Four communities have established early learning services that are culturally centred, operating within community and on Country, which was not available before Children's Ground.**
- 2. 351 children aged 0-5 years were engaged in early learning, marking a 57% increase from 223 in 2017-2019.**
- 3. At the beginning of Children's Ground, only 14% of children aged 0-8 years had previously engaged in early years learning. Now, 68% of children are engaged in early learning with Children's Ground.**
- 4. Children who are strong in First Nations cultural learning are stronger in western learning.**
- 5. Children with a parent/carer employed at Children's Ground are stronger on both First Nations cultural and western learning.**

## Outcome summary

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has established engagement in early learning as a norm in communities where this did not previously exist. For children and families in Children's Ground communities, culturally designed early years learning and wellbeing are becoming part of everyday life. Children's Ground increased the number of First Nations children engaged in early learning and wellbeing, expanding its reach to include new children from each community alongside those initially engaged during the first evaluation period.

# Children know their history and feel confident in their culture

International evidence highlights the importance of children learning their first language and culture, linking this practice to improvements in educational outcomes (including English literacy and numeracy) and contributing to economic, social and political development on a national scale.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, Children's Ground provides space for Elders and cultural leaders to revitalise and re-establish learning in first language and cultural knowledge systems, both within and outside formal early learning sessions.

Children Ground's Learning & Wellbeing Framework centres Learning on Country as an important learning environment for children. This is part of the leading practice of First Nation educational systems. Each community aims to achieve two Learning on Country sessions a week to ensure children and families engage in cultural teaching, learning and transmission on Country, strengthening identity, law and learning.

## Key findings:

- 1. Children now have access to a First Nations system of learning and wellbeing, designed by First Nations people and based in their language and culture – a service that did not previously exist.**
- 2. The number of children engaged in Learning on Country more than doubled between evaluation periods, rising from 137 to 351.**
- 3. 100% of children in engaged in cultural learning alongside their family.**
- 4. Learning on Country was delivered on 606 occasions, up by 285 occasions from 2017-2019.**
- 5. 84% of First Nations staff/ family members (n=25) reported an improvement in children's first language and cultural learning since starting with Children's Ground.**

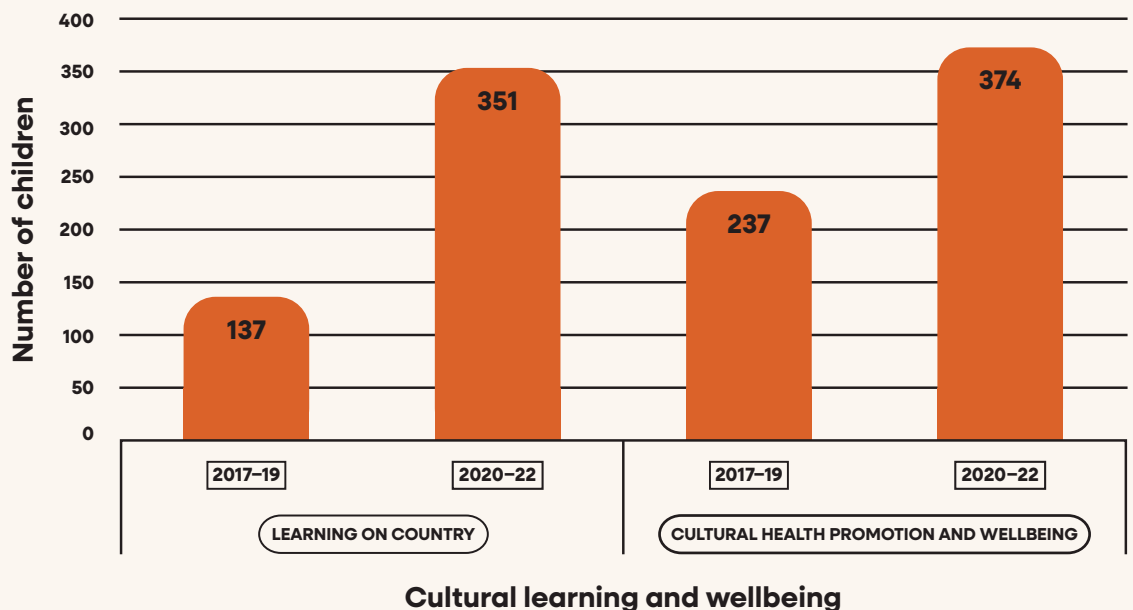
<sup>6</sup> Turner, MK; Children's Ground. 2023. Apmeregentyle. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia.

“I’ve seen a lot of changes. Ampe [children] come back to Children’s Ground, little ones come with their aunty, grandmother, to learn out bush, like about bush foods... they learn more and they look at things and touching with their hands, looking with their eyes and they know the tracks and what made those tracks... Children’s Ground is taking the kids out bush, showing them how to do things and make things.”

50-60 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

**Figure 5**

Number of children 0-8 years who engaged in cultural learning with Children’s Ground.



## Outcome summary

Evidence shows an increase in the number of First Nations children engaged in cultural learning and wellbeing. The number of children participating in Learning on Country increased 156%, rising from 137 in 2017-2019 to 351 in 2020-2022. Similarly, the number of children involved in Cultural Health Promotion and Wellbeing rose 58%, up from 237 in 2017-2019 to 374 in 2020-2022.

Progress in this outcome lays the foundation for the overall learning and wellbeing of First Nations people of all ages, as evidence shows that children who are strong in their cultural learning also excel in other key developmental domains.



**“It’s really eye catching, because I never seen anything like this before, people just stayed home. Children’s Ground is taking the kids out bush, we are showing them how to do things and make things.”**

*55-65 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*





# Children are healthy and happy

The Family Health & Wellbeing framework recognises that children's lifelong learning, wellbeing and opportunities are impacted not only by their own health, but also by the health and wellbeing of their family. Furthermore, it acknowledges that cultural wellbeing is fundamental to overall health and wellbeing.

The Family Health & Wellbeing framework takes health outside of clinics and into the community. It aims to provide access to high-quality, comprehensive and culturally safe health promotion, prevention and early intervention.

*“Washing their hands, washing their face, blowing their noses, hygiene... They're learning about their ears, keeping their ears clean. And keeping their teeth clean. And their eyes and nose... Children's Ground teach kids how to stay healthy and clean.”*

30-40 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

## Key findings:

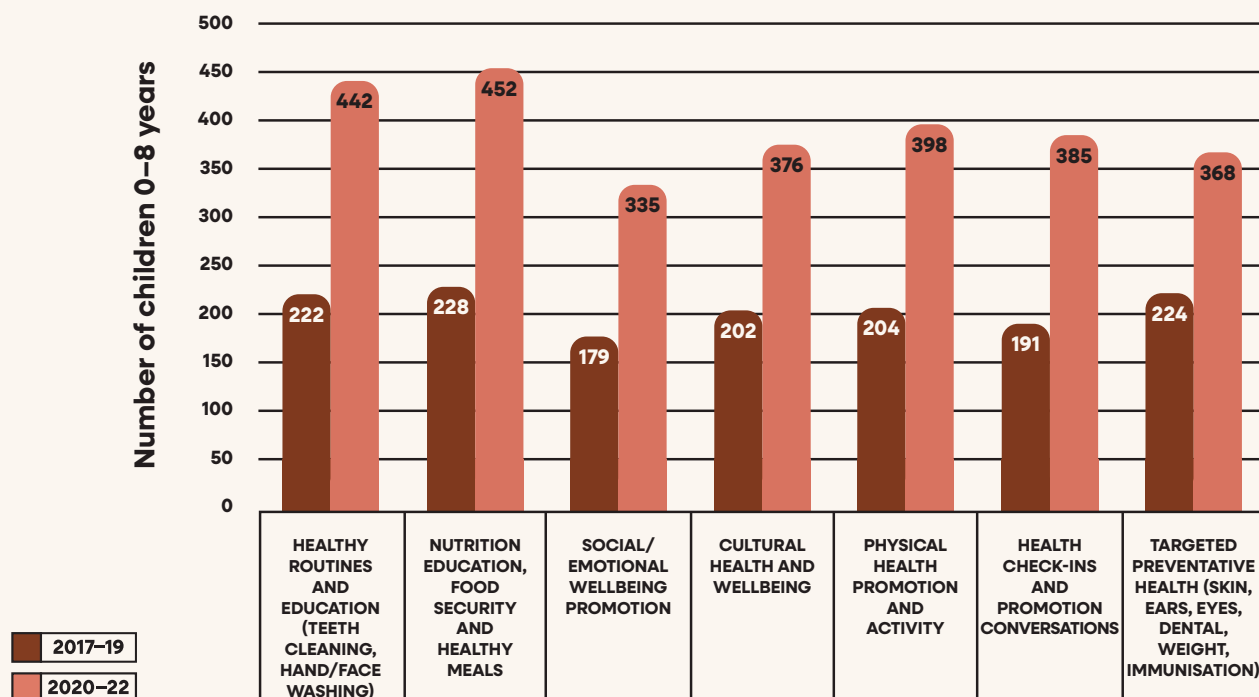
- 1. 468 children aged 0-8 years engaged in preventative health promotion and support, up 83% from 256 in 2017-2019.**
- 2. Child engagement in nutrition almost doubled with a 98% increase, from 228 children in 2017-2019 to 452 in 2020-2022.**
- 3. Child engagement in the key health areas of social/emotional wellbeing and healthy routines nearly doubled.**
- 4. 91% of First Nations staff/family members (n=24) reported improvements in children's physical health, and 83% reported better social and emotional wellbeing since Children's Ground started.**

*“Keeping them healthy. Make sure they get healthy food all the time. It is important for their body so they don't have to get sick and so they can grow stronger.”*

40-50 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

**Figure 6**

Number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in health promotion, by type, from 2020 to 2022.



## Outcome summary

Access to health promotion and prevention has increased through place-based delivery, with health integrated into learning and through culturally responsive and culturally safe promotion and support. This has enabled increased engagement in health for children, normalising healthy behaviours and improvements in health access.

For example, a comprehensive nutrition program, daily healthy routines, health literacy and targeted health promotion for children have created positive health behaviour change. Children engage in cultural health practices as part of Learning on Country sessions, collecting, preparing and applying bush medicines, learning about bush foods and strengthening their spirit through Learning on Country practice and protocols. Access to mainstream child health services has improved as well as access to and engagement with Angangkere (traditional healers).

Data demonstrates that Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing delivery is creating critical building blocks for long-term health and wellbeing and addressing key drivers of health disadvantage.

# Key findings: Change and impact for Families



**Aspiration:**  
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.



First Nations experts and western researchers both recognise families as the single biggest determinant in a child's development and long-term wellbeing.

Research demonstrates that children in families and environments facing economic stress, neglect and violence fare worse across a range of life indicators, including education and access to basic services.<sup>7</sup> They also face lifelong health and mental health challenges, with higher risks of major depression, heart disease and diabetes.

The majority of families in the communities leading Children's Ground experience poverty and economic stress, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism and other significant challenges.

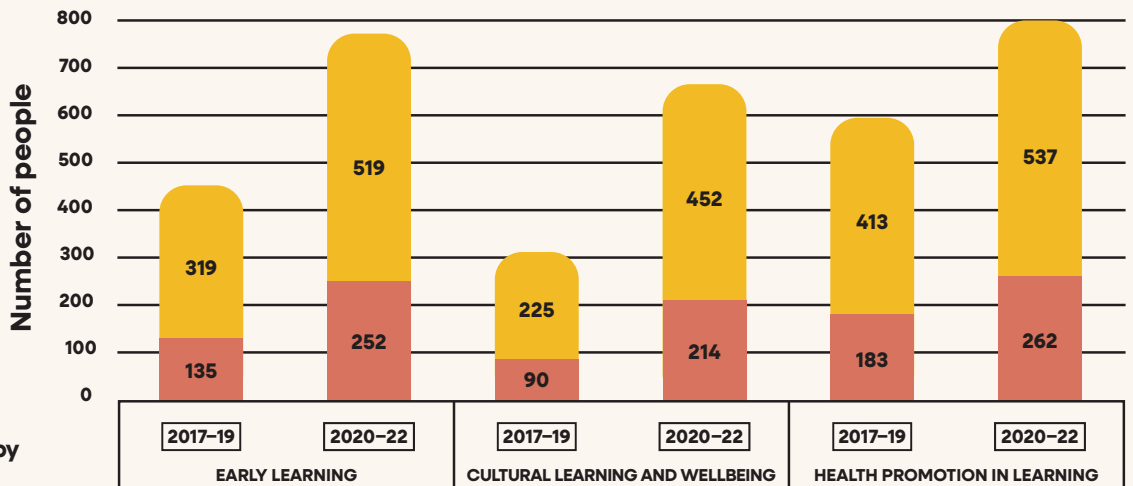
western evidence shows that *"it is just as important that we identify the conditions that parents and families need to flourish, as it is to identify the conditions that children need in order to flourish."*<sup>8</sup>

To achieve the stated aspiration for families, and the key headline indicator 'Families are walking alongside their children', the CG Approach tracks the progress of families across the three key outcomes listed in the following pages.

<sup>7</sup> Heckman, J. 2006. Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*; 312(5782):1900-2.

<sup>8</sup> Moore, T. 2024. Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Report. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2>.

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



**Figure 7**  
Family engagement by age group and type

In First Nations families and communities, all generations are responsible for the development, health and wellbeing of the children in the community. Accordingly, Elders and families established a key policy of all children engaging in early learning being accompanied by a family member. This intergenerational approach aligns with First Nations teachings, promoting learning from Elders and cultural leaders.

## Outcome summary

The evidence shows that Children’s Ground has continued to create the conditions that ensure all children have family members actively involved in their learning, wellbeing and development. This was achieved during the first evaluation and has continued through the second evaluation period.

The increase in engagement of families is intergenerational, suggesting a strengthening across generations within families. The reports from families demonstrate the strengthening of family connection and wellbeing and a growing sense of empowerment.

## Key findings:

- 1. 519 family members aged 18+ have engaged in learning and health promotion alongside their children, up 63% from 319 in 2017-2019.**
- 2. 92% of First Nations staff/family members (n=25) felt there were more activities and opportunities for children and families to spend time together since the start of the CG Approach.**
- 3. 87% of First Nations staff/family members (n=23) reported that families are ‘walking alongside their children’ more since Children’s Ground began.**

# Families are economically strong

Ensuring families are economically strong involves both short-term and long-term goals. A key long-term goal is the number of families experiencing economic independence (i.e. being free from welfare and above the poverty line), whereas short- and medium-term goals include increased opportunities for employment, increased employment skills, reduced practical barriers (e.g. transport), creating entry points into micro-enterprise, and offering support to achieve financial stability through financial literacy and management support.

To achieve these goals, the CG Approach prioritises employing local community-based First Nations people, and implementing a flexible workforce strategy to reduce barriers to engagement and employment sustainability. The goal is to create positive and successful employment experiences, whether working casually or on part- or full-time contracts, that leverage community skills and talents, building work experience over time. This strategy ensures that health factors, family stress or cultural obligations do not force people out of the workforce.

*“When I got involved I really want to get a job and to teach young kids. Because I had nothing to do, when I was at home, you know, couldn't get a job anywhere, because you've got to have all these certificates and what not, qualifications. But I had the [cultural] knowledge. Because I grew up with my great grandparents and my nanna and all of her brothers and sisters.”*

30-40 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

## Key findings:

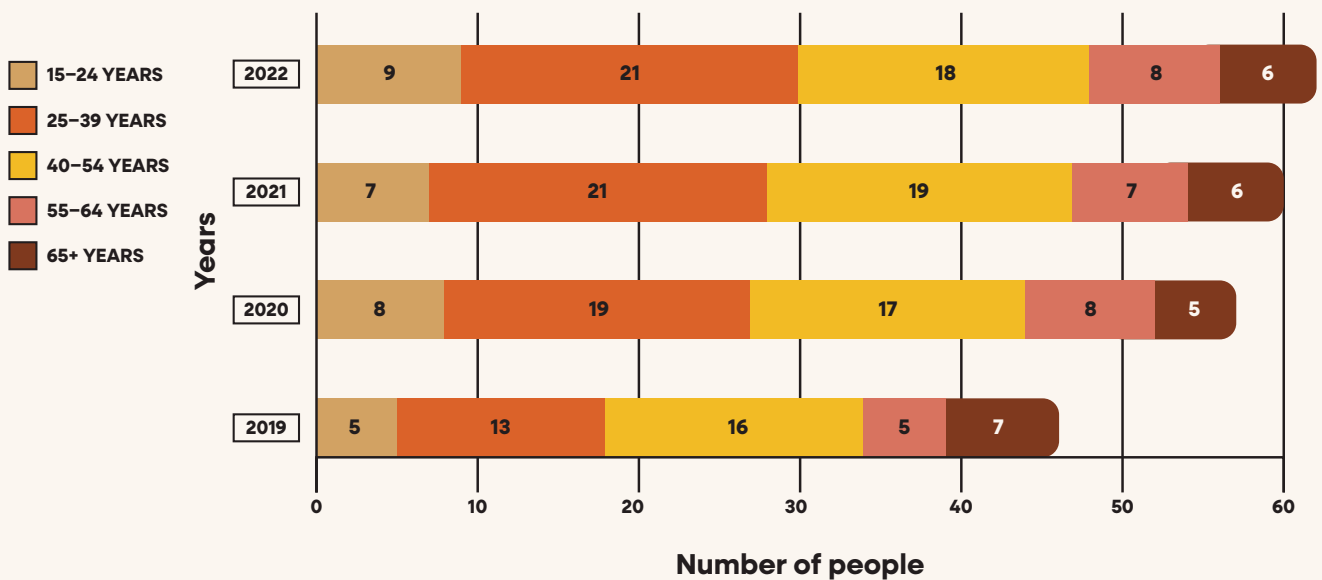
- 1. 83 local First Nations people were employed at Children's Ground, a 41% increase from 2017 to 2019.**
- 2. From 2017 to 2022, of the 73 community-based First Nations staff, 31% had never worked in paid employment before. 71% were not employed when they started working with Children's Ground. Of these, 83% had not worked in the past 12 months.**
- 3. 107 First Nations people engaged in employment support and/or financial literacy and money management support.**
- 4. 121 First Nations people engaged in training and professional development.**
- 5. 205 First Nations people from all four Children's Ground communities engaged in enterprise development.**

“I work to help my kids, my grandchildren, instead of me staying at home doing nothing. They’d probably end up doing that too. But it’s better if you go to work. And I told them you’ve got to get up in the morning and get ready for school and I get ready for work.”

45-55 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

**Figure 8**

Number of First Nations people employed with Children’s Ground, by age group and year



## Outcome summary

Evaluation data and findings demonstrate that Children’s Ground is continuing to increase First Nations engagement in employment, particularly with people who have never or rarely worked in paid employment.

The data shows that people are continuing to increase their hours worked and moving to more fixed-term contracts as their experience grows. Others are engaging in enterprise development, building their experience across diverse economic opportunities.

This evaluation period saw increased employment support and engagement in training and professional development. While not yet reaching the extent intended in the full CG Approach, the impact of local First Nations employment continues to be an important foundation and driver for long-term change for families.

# Families are healthy and socially strong

The wellbeing of the family directly impacts the wellbeing and development of children. The long-term strategy of Children's Ground is to support children into adulthood so that they can become a generation of families arising from improved opportunities.

In the short- to medium-term Children's Ground works with families to strengthen health, wellbeing, social connection and cultural life. This in turn supports the care conditions children need to thrive.

*“And Children's Ground, they are there to support and help families. Make sure they on the right track and keep supporting them. Some people really need that support and to be really walked beside.”*

40-50 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

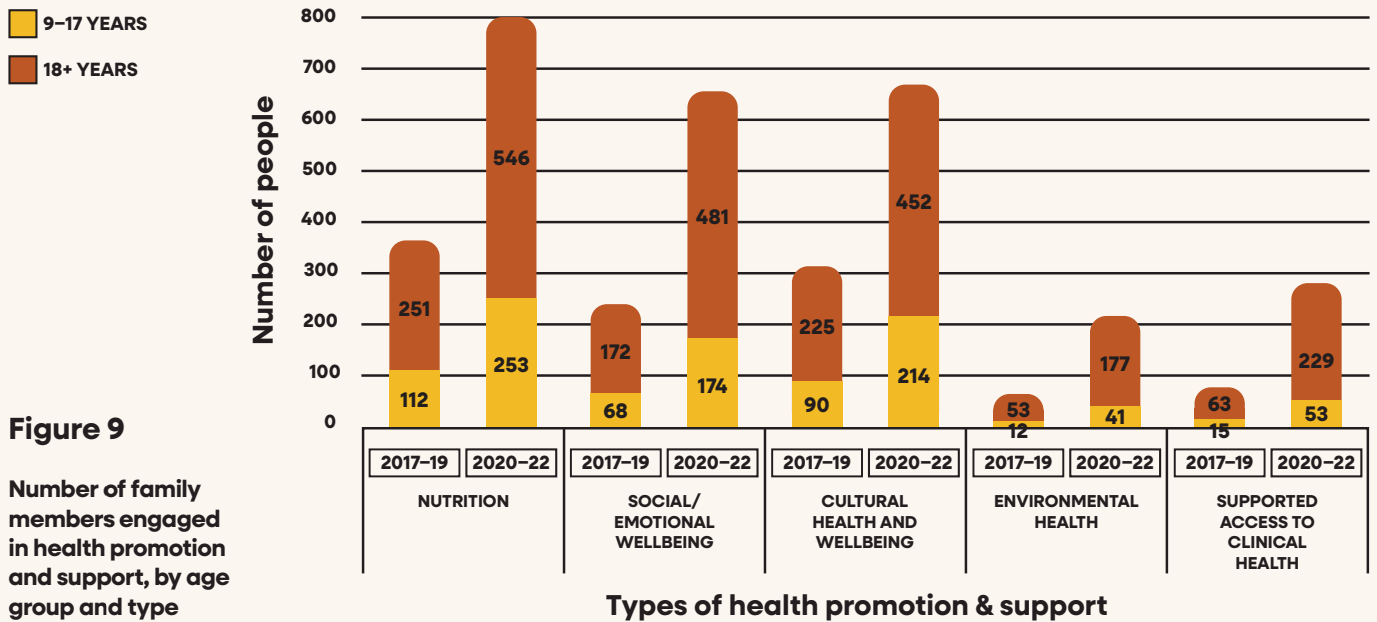
## Key findings:

- 1. 914 family members engaged in health promotion and support, an 88% increase from 487 in 2017-2019.**
- 2. 655 family members received social and emotional wellbeing support, a 173% increase from 2017-2019. This included 174 young people aged 9-17 years and 481 adults aged 18 years and over.**
- 3. 88% of First Nations staff/family members reported easier access to services for children's physical health and 75% reported easier access for emotional health (n=24).**
- 4. 92% reported easier access to services for adult physical health (n=25) and 74% reported easier access to emotional health (n=23).**
- 5. 503 people of all ages engaged in family and community celebrations and events. This is a decrease from 562 in 2017-19. The COVID-19 impact is noted in outcome summary below.**



“Whenever you hear that a family is hanging out with Children's Ground or working with them, it's always like, ‘oh, awesome’, like a big sigh of relief knowing that they've got that support and community around them... And you know that the family have access to support that is grounded in that grassroots advocacy, First Nations knowledge, history, stories and ways of doing things.”

Local service provider, 2023



## Outcome summary

Children’s Ground has established critical conditions to support the health and wellbeing of families. Access to and engagement in health and cultural activities increased, while engagement in social celebrations and events decreased due to the limitations of COVID.

The increase in family members engaged in health promotion and support and social/emotional wellbeing was consistent with increased health resourcing. This contributed to improved health literacy, positive family-level health behaviour changes and role modelling, and community level health promotion. Counselling and trauma support was accessed across all age groups, providing opportunities for support, early intervention and responses to risk and safety for children, young people, women and families.

The findings show that Children's Ground promotes whole-family wellbeing by supporting access to responsive, culturally informed services where people live and by providing safe, positive environments that support social connectedness.

# Key findings: Change and impact for Communities



**Aspiration:  
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.**



The ultimate goal of the CG Approach is to achieve equity, justice and wellbeing at the community level. Efforts made at the child and family level lay the foundation for transformational community-level change and breaking through entrenched disadvantage and injustice across whole populations.

Local governance and leadership underpin long-term community outcomes, a principle embedded in Children's Ground's dual governance structure. Organisational governance requires both western and First Nations systems of governance to be equally recognised. Authorised local First Nations governance structures exist, both regionally and community by community.

While significant progress has been made at the child and family level, community outcomes are expected to take the full 25 years of the CG Approach to be achieved, as children who have

experienced the positive outcomes of the CG Approach grow into adults who can sustain and amplify these changes in their communities. Accordingly, substantial change in community outcomes was not anticipated at this early stage.

However, it is still possible to monitor progress by examining the foundational building blocks of community change: strong local community governance and empowerment, increased social and cultural connectedness, and the further development of social, cultural and economic capital within the community over the course of a generation.

This section summarises the early indicators of progress that have been identified through this evaluation, highlighting areas of potential growth and development as the CG Approach continues to be implemented.

## Building block 1.

# Local governance, empowerment and leadership

Local community-level governance and leadership is one of the most critical drivers for change. During this evaluation period, First Nations leadership has been a highlight and has continued to strengthen at both the community and regional level.

The number of First Nations people engaging in regional and community governance nearly doubled from 107 people in 2017-2019 to 197 people in 2020-2022.

The development and progress in local governance and leadership has been led by Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (the First Nations Governance Group), the strengthening of local community-by-community governance, and through regular leadership opportunities.

Children's Ground leadership development focuses on internal leadership as well as public leadership. Children's Ground creates opportunities for next-generation leaders and those who have rarely had a voice to make their voices heard locally, nationally and internationally. Through such opportunities, 19 First Nations staff presented at ten conferences during the evaluation period.

*“But Children's Ground, since you work here, you just know you're a leader. You just feel like you're a leader. You just feel that, when you come here, you just feel like ‘S\*\*t, man, I want to change something today.’ That's how you feel.”*

35-45 years, Male, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

## Building block 2.

# Safety, social and cultural capital

Children's Ground's focus on increasing access to culturally centred services, safety and social inclusion has resulted in high engagement levels and increased feelings of safety and social connection, with 1,415 people participating from 2020-2022, up from 978 in 2017-2019.

**In evaluation interviews, 100% of First Nations staff and family members (n=21) reported that Children's Ground is a safe place for children and families.**

Place-based delivery is vital for creating safe, inclusive environments and embedding services within the community fabric. Children's Ground has established inclusive and safe delivery settings across various locations, including on Country, in central hubs and in community.

Children's Ground's progress in place-based delivery and full implementation of the CG Approach has been hindered by a lack of accessible or available community infrastructure and intergenerational community centres.

Intergenerational engagement and leadership is fostered through cultural transmission, with learning environments enhancing community-level cultural strength and cohesion during the evaluation period.

These efforts lay the groundwork for long-term community cohesion, underscoring the importance of social and cultural capital in driving sustained change.

*“It's safe, you know, leave your problems behind and really, it's family working together.”*

30-40 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

**Evidence shows that Children's Ground is laying the foundation for the next generation of children to experience** social and cultural economic wellbeing over the long term through access to and engagement in education, improved health, cultural empowerment and family employment.

*"It [seeing family work] will affect their [children's] lives too, like they'll say, 'Look, they do it. They got up and worked every morning. We're going to get up and work every morning. Because they're trying to make a road for us.' That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to make that clear road. Right now, everything's on that road, we've got to make it clear so they can walk."*

35-45 years, Male, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

### Building block 3

## Economic capital

Economic capital is crucial for community wellbeing. Family employment outcomes are a strong indicator of economic capital, as they directly influence financial stability and growth. The increase in First Nations employment at Children's Ground impacts families both financially and provides children with critical role models in the workforce.

Evidence shows that Children's Ground is laying the foundation for the next generation of children to experience economic wellbeing over the long term through access to and engagement in education, improved health, cultural empowerment and family employment.

Empowerment is foundational for economic success. Empowered individuals are more likely to pursue and sustain employment, contributing to community economic capital.

Data collected for this evaluation showed people who experience strong personal empowerment (identity, resilience and self-efficacy) experience fewer negative life stresses (domestic violence, interactions with jail/court and child protection).<sup>9</sup>

By focusing on empowerment and employment, Children's Ground aims to strengthen economic capital, ensuring community growth and prosperity.

*"It [Children's Ground support] makes me feel more confident in working. And keeps my skills and all this. And talking into things like, in the years to come I'll feel more confident."*

20-30 years, Male, First Nations staff/family member, 2023

### Key findings summary

Evaluation evidence demonstrates an increase in feelings of empowerment and leadership. This has continued to grow and build from the first evaluation period.

Progress towards community-level change can be seen in the strengthening of local governance, generational leadership, community employment, cultural transmission and the promotion and protection of safety for children, families and communities.

Long-term community-level change will continue to be compromised without permanent and high-quality infrastructure for place-based delivery. However, the early foundational progress evidenced in this section demonstrates positive impacts have been achieved for families in communities.

9 Interplay. 2023. Evaluating Impact Holistically with Interplay Mapping, Children's Ground Baseline Data Report. Unpublished.

# First Nations impact analysis

This analysis was undertaken by 20 First Nations staff, analysing de-identified qualitative data from evaluation interviews with First Nations families and staff.



## First language and cultural teaching and learning – on Country and intergenerational

**Star-like shape, Blue and white dots and Yellow curves:** The 'Star Shape' in the middle is a fire, with the people sitting around it. 'Blue and white dots' and 'Yellow curves' are the knowledge. Elders are teaching our kids and young people, with the families all together. Within Children's Ground we have learning led by our families.

ALTYEKE ARTWEYENGARTWEYE  
AKALTYIRREME. ULYPME ARLE TYEPERRE:  
Anperirrepirremenge akaltyirreme  
akngerre areye uthene ampe akweke areye.  
Ulypme anwernekenhe uthene, itelarentye  
anwernekenhe tyeperre re.

**Intergenerational learning:** It starts with the Elders teaching our children. It is our way of teaching, across generations. Everyone is included. Elders are the ones who pass on the knowledge to the children, the young people and the families. That is how knowledge is passed on. Together.



### Families standing together

**Four blue half circles with people:** These are people. The larger shapes are adults, the smaller shapes are children. The old people are standing behind the young people – we are all being led and taught by the old people. 'Families walking alongside their children' is one of the most important parts of Children's Ground. 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. This is bringing everyone together and leading the way for our children.

**ARREKWERLKWERLE:** Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe urrkapentyakngerre itelareme; ampe akwekentyele akaltyenthetyeke impene re, arrekwerlenye areyekenhe itelarentye uthene lyetenye itelarentye uthene.

**Starting early:** Starting early with the little ones, teaching them. This is the most important thing. Learning old and new ways with family for children's early development.



### Communities are leading

**Footprints:** Footprints are coming in and out – children and families and communities interacting with each other and Children's Ground – sharing and caring. The footprints are us always looking back and following the Ancestors in our teaching and learning. The footprints always return to 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. So, children have 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.

**APURTELHILEME TYERRTYE AREYE:** Anwerne arle arelhe tyerrtye areye anyentek-irreme arrekwerlenye areyekenhe angkentye akaltyelenthetyeke. Anwerne arle akngerremakngerre-irreme.

**Bringing everyone together, everyone leading together:** We are bringing everyone together and everyone is leading the way. We are teaching old cultural ways on Country and about Country. We are growing and getting bigger. There are more and different roles for everyone.



### Employment from our communities

**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.

**AKALTYELENTHHEME:** Anwerne ingkerrke akaltyele antherreme angkentye anwernekenhe. Anwernekenhe angkentye arle akwete arle neme. Anwernele anwerneke arrpe urrkapepapeme, arrpenheke akwenye. Anwerne tyerrtye areye mwerre awelhapelheme alakenheke urrkapeme.

**Knowledge sharing and ownership:** We are sharing, teaching and learning our language and culture. We still have our culture and language with us. We are responsible, we are doing this for ourselves, not for anyone else. We are feeling proud and happy that we are doing our work our way.



### A safe place for everyone

**Semi-circle shapes:** In the middle and all over this painting, these represent ilthe/ampere, 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 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 APELE APMERE ARTEKE** Arelhe tyerrtye areyele. Ampekenhe Ahelhe apmere arteke akeme. Mwerre anwerne awelheme anwerneke artweye areye uthene urrkapentyakngerre arrpenhe areye aremele urrkapentye ikwereke apetyeltaneme arltengartenge. Anwerne atangentyele urrkapetyeke.

**Children’s Ground is home:** This is home, Children’s Ground is home for all of us, communities, staff, families and children. People don’t see it as a school, instead, we see it as home. It is a safe place. We feel good in ourselves. We are all working together.





### Children and families are supported

**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 the kids, with families walking alongside them. We will continue learning and growing together forever.

**MWERREWERNE IRREPIRREME:** Anwernele areme ampe areye arle mwerrewerne anteme aneme. Amparle tyerrtye atyepatyepa neme, merne mwerre arlkwemenge. Itne mwerre akaltyirreme. Itne akaltye anteme iwenhe merne mwerre, iltye alewelhetyeke arlke. Itneke artweye arle akaltyirreme nthakenhthakenhe ampe itnekenhe amangelhilettyeke mwerrentye; merne mwerre awantelhilanetyeke, ngangkerewerne arlke akngetyeke ampe renhe rlkerte apeke irreme.

**Positive changes for kids and families:** There are positive changes for kids. Their bodies are strong and they are settled. They are eating well, getting healthy food and getting education on food and hygiene. Kids now know what to eat and when to wash their hands after eating. The families are engaging with health too, learning and supporting their children and whole family to be healthier. Families are also getting the support for their children when they are sick.



### Money story, funders and supporters

**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 for our children, families and communities.

**PWERTE, MANE ANTHENTYAKNGERRE AREYE AKERTE:** mane anthentyakngerre areye arle impene nthurre. Itne akwenhe Ampekenhe Ahelhe amangelhileme arteke. Arelhe tyerrtye areye arle, urrkapentyakngerre areye arle akangkeme nthurre mane anthentyakngerre areye anwernenge atantyele akwete anemeke.

**Importance of funders and donors:** Funders are important and support how Children’s Ground is growing. Many have been there from the beginning. The families and First Nations staff appreciate the support from all the funders because families understand that with this support, we can continue our work in teaching language and culture and western learning too.

# Has the CG Approach been implemented in line with the Practice Principles?

This section presents key process evaluation findings, showing that the CG Approach has been largely implemented in line with the organisation's ten Practice Principles, which are detailed on pages 46-47.

Represented by the blue circles in the CG Approach diagram (on page 9), the Practice Principles guide and shape how Children's Ground works, ensuring their efforts are culturally informed and evidence-based.



Each of the ten Practice Principles represents a key condition recognised by First Nations and western evidence and knowledge as critical to achieving change.

The CG Approach requires all ten principles to be operating consistently and concurrently to achieve systemic reform and long-term change.

“It is the people, and the whole structure too, working together and all having a voice. All of that, every little thing is a part of making Children's Ground, every aspect of it, it just draws you in.”

*30-40 years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*



# The 10 Practice Principles

## Child, family & community led

Children's Ground belongs to First Nations children, families and communities. They are integrally involved in the governance, design and delivery of Children's Ground's programs and services and lead its day-to-day operations. Children's Ground prioritises First Nations governance and leadership structures.

Prevention and early intervention are central to all efforts. This principle focuses on the importance of children having the best start in life and opportunities through childhood. Evidence shows that effective early childhood learning and wellbeing and positive family engagement are key indicators for the future wellbeing of children. This means reaching children before they are born, and into early childhood, alongside their families. Providing critical foundations for life in areas such as learning, health, culture, and economic, social and emotional wellbeing.

## Start early

## A critical mass

The CG Approach is designed as a whole-of-community approach. This principle moves away from the traditional service system approach, which often focuses on individuals or single families, but not whole communities. Instead, the CG Approach engages children and families across the entire community to drive a whole-of-community change – from a place of disempowerment to one of opportunity and empowerment. Engaging a critical mass (75% of children and families) is important to achieve sustained population or community-level change.

This principle recognises that a comprehensive, integrated service system is required to create the conditions for long-term child and family wellbeing, and prevent extreme economic poverty, inequity and intergenerational disadvantage. Individual services are necessary but not sufficient. Rather, it is how services work together, to wrap around and respond to the needs of children and families, that can create change. This includes integration of education, health, wellbeing, employment, economy, society, law, environment and culture.

## In community

## Deliver the whole, not the bits

This principle is about children, families and the whole community enjoying opportunities, and safe and inclusive environments where they live, as part of everyday life. Rather than services being 'delivered to' people, delivery is in, with and by communities. This requires investment in high-quality infrastructure, local governance and the cultural, social and economic capital of communities.



**Innovation:  
combining  
old & new**

This principle recognises that First Nations knowledge systems are the oldest and most developed in the world. The CG Approach integrates leading western knowledge, practices, and innovation with First Nations knowledge systems and values in design, strategy, delivery, and evaluation, creating a dynamic, evidence-based service system for children, families, and communities.

All children and families deserve the very best. This principle sets the standards for excellence that all children and families deserve to enable long-term wellbeing. It aims to redress the history of poorly resourced communities, aiming to provide high-quality resources and services within each community leading the CG Approach. It encourages everyone to work in a way that expects the best for and from everyone – children, families and staff.



**Expect  
& deliver  
the best**



**Assume &  
celebrate  
ability**

This principle recognises that every community, every child, and every family has ability and strengths. Children's Ground harnesses and builds upon people's strengths and moves away from deficit and risk-focused services that position people as 'problems', 'in need' and disempowered. This principle celebrates people's abilities and creates conditions for them to express their talents.

This principle aims to ensure Children's Ground is an environment that centres a First Nations worldview, is culturally responsive and prioritises the cultural safety and respect for all people. Since colonisation, First Nations people have been forced to navigate dominant western systems that have been culturally damaging, culturally unsafe and lacking in cultural respect or understanding. At the centre of this principle is recognising, valuing and embedding First Nations systems of knowledge and practice from over 65,000 years.



**Culturally  
safe**




**Stay for the  
long term**


This principle moves away from the reactive and short-term program focus that is far too common. Instead, the CG Approach has a long-term strategy, working with children and their families from pre-birth to 25 years, walking alongside them through all major risk and transition periods. After 230 years of inequity, disempowerment and social, cultural and economic exclusion, a long-term approach is required to create, consolidate and sustain generational change for current and future generations of children, families and communities.


# Which of the ten Practice Principles are on track?

**Evaluation of the Practice Principles reveals that delivery within some principles is progressing well, while others have been compromised by limited resources and impacted by COVID-19..**



 On track and effective

 Strengthening required

 Not on track

**What areas of delivery need development and improvement (as identified by staff and family members)?**











Increasing engagement with more children and families, particularly men, young people, parents and people requiring more comprehensive support to engage.

Increasing support for Elders to attend Learning on Country for cultural teaching and transmission (which can be challenging due to dialysis and health issues).

Fully establishing place-based delivery in communities, with fit-for-purpose community centre infrastructure.

Continuing to strengthen service integration internally and externally.











Ongoing development of the CG Approach working towards excellence. This includes increasing delivery efficiency and time management, improving organisational policies and systems, and strengthening the quality and integrity of some key delivery areas.

	<b>CHILDREN'S GROUND PRINCIPLE</b>	<b>2017-19</b>	<b>2020-22</b>	<b>SUMMARY OF PROGRESS</b>
	<p><b>Child, family and community-led</b></p> <p>First Nations people always lead the way in developing and stewarding the CG Approach.</p>			<p>First Nations regional and community governance increased in frequency and strength during the evaluation period. While the presence of First Nations community members at regional meetings was already high, formally establishing First Nations-only governance meetings further strengthened local voice, decision making and regional governance.</p>
	<p><b>Start early</b></p> <p>There is a focus on supporting children as early as possible in their lives.</p>			<p>Children's Ground has continued to implement this principle effectively by increasing access to and engagement in early learning, nutrition and health promotion and literacy of young children and their families.</p> <p>This principle has been implemented as intended within available resources. However, staff/families emphasise the need to engage more children and families. Strategy and resources are required to increase both access and engagement.</p>
	<p><b>Critical mass</b></p> <p>By working with as many participants as possible, the CG Approach will create a positive 'tipping point' in First Nations communities, enabling broader systemic change.</p>			<p>The CG Approach has almost achieved critical mass with children, with critical mass defined as at least 75% engagement. From 2017 to 2022, 73% of children in Children's Ground communities aged 0-8 years engaged with the CG Approach, exceeding expectations under the growth model.</p> <p>While these successes are notable, it is anticipated that critical mass itself could be achieved – and possibly exceeded – if the full CG Approach is implemented.</p>
	<p><b>Deliver the whole, not the bits</b></p> <p>The CG Approach works holistically with children and their family, responding to key social, cultural and economic determinants.</p>			<p>Growth and significant improvements have been made in delivering and integrating the five service areas of the CG Approach, and expanding local service collaborations. Despite these positive strides, Children's Ground still requires stronger internal integration of activities and enhanced local service collaborations to eliminate service fragmentation. To achieve this, the full CG Approach needs to be sustainable, efficient and effective.</p>
	<p><b>In community</b></p> <p>Place-based delivery ensures Children's Ground is building and strengthening community.</p>			<p>Progress has been made toward achieving this principle, driven by increased in-community and on Country delivery. However, permanent place-based delivery in communities is yet to be achieved. This is due to a lack of fit-for-purpose community infrastructure.</p>

**“Children’s Ground is a place for looking after our children and the country. Not only for the little children but for the big children as well. For everyone, men and for women. To be working and productive. For all of us to come together, doing something together, to live and breathe what we trying to create.”**

*65+ years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*



	<b>CHILDREN'S GROUND PRINCIPLE</b>	<b>2017-19</b>	<b>2020-22</b>	<b>SUMMARY OF PROGRESS</b>
	<p><b>Innovation: combining old and new</b></p> <p>The CG Approach combines old and new ways to get the best outcomes for children, families and communities.</p>			<p>Children's Ground continues to be effective in implementing this principle, with the organisation increasingly centring cultural knowledge while integrating key western leading practice.</p>
	<p><b>Expect and deliver the best</b></p> <p>Excellence underpins all aspects of the CG Approach.</p>			<p>There is still some way to go before this principle is fully achieved. However, progress has been made toward operational excellence, with the development of delivery and organisational systems and standards.</p> <p>Children's Ground will require additional resourcing and ongoing improvements in systems, policies and processes across the organisation to achieve 'on-track' status in this principle.</p>
	<p><b>Assume and celebrate ability</b></p> <p>Children's Ground is a place where the strengths and abilities of First Nations people are recognised and valued.</p>			<p>Children's Ground has been effective in embedding a culture that recognises and values people's strengths and abilities across both evaluation periods. This has been structurally supported through a workforce and employment system that recognises cultural expertise.</p>
	<p><b>Culturally safe</b> <sup>10</sup></p> <p>Children's Ground is a place where First Nations people feel culturally safe, respected and supported.</p>			<p>This principle has been implemented effectively. Providing a culturally safe and empowered environment has been identified as a strength and foundational enabler for engagement in the CG Approach. Language, culture and customary law and standards are recognised, respected, enacted and supported.</p>
	<p><b>Stay for the long term</b></p> <p>As a 25-year approach, Children's Ground is committed to working with communities over the course of a generation.</p>			<p>The second evaluation period has seen the organisation build on efforts to create the foundations for longevity and and sustaining growth, delivery and engagement across the full 25-year life of the CG Approach. This needs to remain an ongoing focus for the organisation.</p>

<sup>10</sup> Note that the principle of 'Culturally Safe' was added in 2020, and therefore was not assessed in the same way in the first evaluation report.

# First Nations process analysis

This is a First Nations analysis of Children's Ground's progress against the ten Practice Principles of the CG Approach.



**Anwerne Ampe-kenhe Ahelhele  
iwerre arratye alhetyeke  
akwete community-ele arlke  
apentetyeke**

**(Community to lead the way)**

Everyone is given the opportunity and space to talk up. People feel valued because they are being asked their opinion and people are listening.

First Nations governance is a safe space for people to speak their mind. It gives people a voice. So many people talk more now. Each community is governing their own group too. They have autonomy.

Young people here are stepping up and given the spaces to be heard and get involved and to lead. Giving them those opportunities which they probably haven't had before.



**Akweke anthurre mapenge urrke  
arne mpwaremele urrkapetyeke**

**(Start early with the little ones)**

Here we are growing with the kids and families, even before the kids are born, so kids are born into this way of learning, being and doing. The children are learning on Country from a very young age. Young mums and pregnant women are learning to keep themselves healthy.

This is a place that families feel is the vision of the old people, that is a culturally led holistic approach. Families are talking about all kids learning all these healthy learning habits. So, the kids are understanding and getting that education through Children's Ground. They are learning why we have chronic illnesses because of lifestyle and diet.

Families can see changes happening, and there's a lot of pride in that.

**Tyerrtye ingkerrenyekenge  
urrkapetyeke**

**(Work with everyone)**

We're working with as many families as we can, and families are getting stronger because they are engaging and feeling empowered.

You can see a lot of staff promoting Children's Ground within their family and community. People talked about how they came to be here through family connections, engaging in learning, to then getting a job with Children's Ground.

We want to reach a critical mass, but we don't have the money to keep up with all the people who want to come and want to work.



**Arne ingkerrenyekenge anyentelhe  
ilettyeke: tyerretye ngwenhe  
mwerre anetyeke, akaltye  
irremele, tyerrtye ngwenge  
artweye mapenge**

**(Connect everything: learning,  
health, culture, work)**

Children's Ground does things holistically – not in silos. Because they are taking care of every part of people and family life.

Everything is integrated. People don't feel safe if you are only working with them about one thing. It needs to be the whole package of people's wellbeing in that everything has to be good. This is something that families would never have had before Children's Ground.

Families see we do health, we do nutrition, we do learning, we have employment. And culturally, that's how it's always been, within Aboriginal people for over 60,000 years – people lived in an integrated system.

Some of our families come through Children's Ground [to access other services] because they might not have the confidence, and we have language speakers and that can make it easier to understand other services.

Most families feel Children's Ground listens to our needs and supports us.



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

People are talking about building stronger families and communities to improve people's health, education and lives. Strengthening communities needs to happen in communities – but this has been hard in places where we don't have a place or a building.

Children's Ground is not just one place. It's a lot of places – it's on Country, it's at the hub and it's in communities – its wherever people are. And we need to engage families from all language groups in our communities so we can build our communities.



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

Children's Ground is about people leading with their cultural knowledge. We have the Elders to learn from. We all have to go through Elders – this is the cultural way. The older people are learning from young

people too. Young people know today's tech and show people how it works.

In our enterprise we have books and songs and are sharing them with families. These are new ways of teaching language and culture.

We are being able to adapt and make the most of what we have. Some things are hard to be done traditional ways, but we're still going ahead with cultural learning, being able to change and adapt to how it can be done now.



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

Children's Ground understands that we are Aboriginal people first. We have our cultural knowledge, practices and responsibilities, and supports this in delivery and outside of delivery. Our best practice is sharing cultural knowledge and other strengths with children and each other.

Families see that we go ahead without all the funding we need. But we don't compromise. Everything we do is carefully considered.

Decision-making comes from down here, from everyone working together. You can't get answers when you are coming from the top. It needs to come from those people with that lived experience, who live everyday of their lives. And this is the right way to work.

There are First Nations people in positions at all levels. They are not always jobs that you see our families in. Our families can see that it's possible and can aspire to be in those types of roles for their cultural knowledge or western qualifications.

## **Mwarrentye arle arne mpwareme renhe tnaketyeke**

### **(Use and celebrate people's ability and strength)**

We are valued for our cultural knowledge and skills and get paid in that area. People don't need a piece of paper to show they are an expert. People feel valued as Aboriginal people and what they bring and contribute. That's something that has never really happened in organisations.

It's that little bit of encouragement and support in small ways for people and recognising what skills they have and support people to build on their skills. Instead of saying you need all these trainings to work here, Children's Ground looks beyond that – it's seeing actually the people from within and the skills they bring for First Nations people. We always celebrate people's abilities and different skills.

## **Arntarnte aretyeke tyerrtye mape ante iterrentry anwerne- kenhe nthenhele apeke anwerne warrke-irremele**

### **(To protect and keep our knowledge and people safe wherever we engage and work)**

Cultural safety in places is not 'provided', it is felt. You can't just say you're culturally safe, people have to feel it.

People are saying that it's cultural safety that holds this place up. It's the culture of the old people and how everyone is here – it's that centre pole, that's what holds the tent. Children's Ground is that centre pole and it's the people in communities holding up the tent because they value it for its cultural safety.

The cultural safety makes people want to be here. Families are saying we have the key ingredient of working with the families leading it – that grassroots working on the ground, because people in communities have the answers and that's the way of working and being to build those healthy families – and that's what makes it culturally safe.

## **Akweke itnekenge akwete anetyeke itnenhenhe amangkelhe-ilenhemele**

### **(Stay with them and grow with them until they are big)**

It's a slow process, but it is working here and now. We are giving kids that early start and good education from the beginning with the families. It [change] may not be big or major yet, but it's there. It's not going to happen overnight or in a year or two years. These things take time because of how people live, the conditions they live in – there are big changes to make.

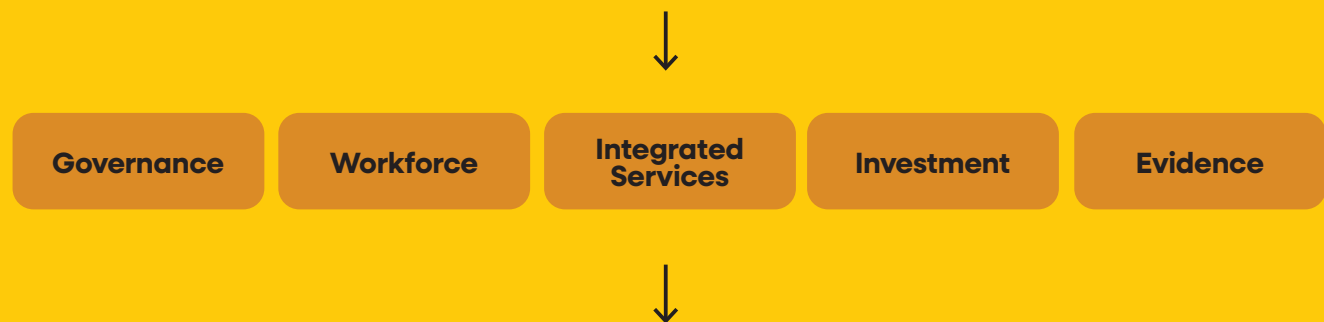
People are so used to projects starting and stopping. Projects and people come and go. But people see we are committed to the long-term. People believe that Children's Ground will stay for the long term.

A lot of our families are here to stay, because they can see Children's Ground making a difference in their lives. Everyone knows we don't have all the money we need for the long-term and we are always asking for money, but that's always transparent.



# Are the Enabling Conditions of the CG Approach on track?

The Enabling Conditions for the CG Approach are represented by orange blocks at the bottom of Figure 1 on page 9.



**Within the CG Approach, the integrated service platform represents ‘what’ is delivered and the ten principles represent ‘how’ services are delivered. The Enabling Conditions for systems change provide the authorising environments for what and how services are delivered, consisting of Governance, Workforce, Investment and Evidence in addition to the Integrated Services platform.**

**Each of these enablers are essential for achieving effectiveness and impact in systems reform.**



**This section examines the progress made from 2017 to 2022 towards enacting and embedding the five enablers of systems change.**

## How are the five Enabling Conditions progressing within the CG Approach?

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children’s Ground is progressing systems change through First Nations-led design, delivery and leadership, with advancement tracked across the five enablers of change within the CG Approach. These are detailed below.

### Governance:

Local decision-making is central to empowerment, which itself underpins self-determination. Evaluation data demonstrates increased empowerment (self-reported) among First Nations staff and family members. Children’s Ground is on track with achieving systemic community governance, within the resources of the growth model. However, there are areas, in particular community-by-community governance, where this can be strengthened as resources for the full CG Approach increase.

### Workforce:

The aim is to build a local First Nations workforce over the long term, both to reduce the negative impacts of intergenerational unemployment and to reform the existing service system, which is compromised by high staff turnover and a predominantly non-First Nations workforce with limited cultural and linguistic expertise. Evidence demonstrates that the foundations for reform in this system area are on track. Success and impact are evidenced in the unprecedented engagement of local people from communities in employment, many of whom have never or rarely experienced paid work and who bring cultural expertise, continuity and retention into the workforce.

### Integrated Services:

Unlike western systems that operate in silos, First Nations systems take a holistic approach, integrating all aspects of life, reflecting what is now understood through western evidence as leading practice. The comprehensive and integrated CG Approach is represented by the central yellow bars in Figure 1 on page 9, (The Children’s Ground Approach).



Progress in service reform is gauged by closely monitoring and evaluating these five critical areas – Learning and Wellbeing, Family Health and Wellbeing, Economic Development and Wellbeing, Community Development and Wellbeing, and Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing – and tracking how they are delivered and integrated both within the CG Approach and through local service collaborations.

Despite the constraints of the growth model, progress has been made in the majority of service areas since 2019. Figure 10 outlines the percent of operational growth by CG Approach service areas, by year. Progress is expected to continue as the full CG Approach becomes adequately resourced and implemented.

Evaluation evidence shows that Children’s Ground has established and grown an integrated service system that is flexible and responsive and is successfully building effective service collaborations, internally and externally, to meet the needs of First Nations children, families and communities.



**Investment:**

This area focuses on securing long-term, outcome-based funding at scale to support the full implementation of the CG Approach. Collective investment aims to achieve scale, mitigate risk, and empower First Nations communities to lead responsive delivery and decision-making.

Children’s Ground has successfully secured strong collective investment from both government and philanthropic sources. However, while income has grown significantly, securing full-scale funding for the complete CG Approach remains a challenge. This risk is compromising both the quality and integrity of the CG Approach and may have an impact on long-term change that can be achieved.






















**Evidence:**

Children’s Ground has made significant progress in embedding First Nations data, evaluation and research sovereignty, as well as culturally relevant evaluation methods. Over the evaluation period, Children’s Ground has consolidated and grown its data-informed planning and cross-cultural learning. Increased First Nations leadership in data collection, analysis and reporting, which also contributed to individual and community empowerment. These efforts are now contributing to national and international evidence bases.

While progress has been made, significant resources and efforts are required to fully realise First Nations sovereignty in evaluation, research methods and practice.

**Figure 10**

This graph shows the operational growth of each service area by year, highlighting how much progress has been made towards full implementation.

PROGRESS AND GROWTH TOWARDS INTEGRATED SERVICE SYSTEM				
	2019	2020	2021	2022
<b>Learning &amp; Wellbeing</b>				
<b>Family Health &amp; Wellbeing</b>				
<b>Economic Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>				
<b>Community Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>				
<b>Cultural &amp; Creative Development &amp; Wellbeing</b>				





# What contribution is the CG Approach making towards broader systems reform?

Evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground is making contributions to systems change by achieving positive outcomes in key areas where governments are struggling both strategically and in response to Closing the Gap outcomes.

The Productivity Commission's 2024 'Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap' identified the need to "disrupt business-as-usual of governments", stating that:

*"What is needed is a paradigm shift. Fundamental change is required, with actions based on a clear logic about how they will achieve that change."*<sup>11</sup>

**Key findings from the Productivity Commission's Review include:**<sup>12</sup>

- 1. Government commitment to shared decision-making is rarely achieved in practice.**
- 2. Government policy doesn't reflect the value of the community-controlled sector.**
- 3. The transformation of government organisations has barely begun.**
- 4. Governments are not enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data.**
- 5. Performance reporting provides only a partial picture of progress.**
- 6. Accountability for delivering on the commitments in the Agreement is lacking.**

<sup>11</sup> Productivity Commission 2024, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study report, volume 1, Canberra.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

Accountability for delivering on the commitments in the Agreement on Closing the Gap is lacking. The CG Approach was designed as a paradigm shift, with clear strategy, logic and evidence to underpin an alternative system, led and delivered by First Nations peoples.

Over six years, Children's Ground has affected change in key Closing the Gap outcomes such as employment, early childhood engagement, culture, health and empowerment. It has been evaluated as effective and impactful for children and families in key areas where the Closing the Gap agenda and investment has made minimal progress in over a decade.

This evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia reinforces findings from Children's Ground's previous evaluations. The CG Approach is distinctive in that it offers a clear suite of integrated services that are culturally designed and require local community control across all aspects of delivery, governance and evaluation. It is the ability to do what is required to meet the needs of community, to be flexible rather than prescriptive, and honour the culture and language of the community that differentiates the CG Approach.

“The question is, **‘How are we going to do this better than we did last week or what's happening from last week that we can't understand?’** So people go to meetings and talk about it. And they make their own decisions, too... Because we know what we do is right for our children. We're making decisions for our children, for families... **We have to do it this way because it's working.**”

*65+ years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

**First Nations people, western evidence and recommendations from many reviews have identified key systems requirements for reform, which include:**

- 1. Being First Nations led – bottom up not top down.**
- 2. Working concurrently with the child, family, and community.**
- 3. Integration and holistic services design and delivery.**
- 4. Long-term and preventative approaches.**
- 5. Place-based delivery and investment.**
- 6. Outcomes focused approaches.**

**Children's Ground is demonstrating practice leadership and providing evidence of a system that embeds all these features, achieving progress and impact in the key foundations needed for children, families, and communities to flourish.**

# Western analysis

**This second evaluation evidenced that the CG Approach impacted the learning, life and wellbeing of children and families, building on the initial three-year period of operations (2017 to 2019). The CG Approach has been implemented with integrity to the ten principles within the resources available. The evidence indicates that the comprehensive design of the CG Approach works at the child, family and community level and, in doing so, is positively impacting the key conditions for achieving long-term change.**

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that after six years, children in the four communities leading the CG Approach now consistently experience early childhood learning, nutrition, and health and wellbeing promotion. This is emerging as a new normal. Prior to Children's Ground, it was not common for children to engage in early childhood education, and the integrated wraparound services provided through the CG Approach for children and families did not exist.

Through culturally centred delivery, children are now growing up with First Nations approaches to learning, health and development – approaches that western evidence recognises as critically important for early and lifelong learning and wellbeing. This is linked to greater success in educational outcomes and contributes more broadly to the country's economic, social and political life.<sup>13 14 15</sup>

Children are progressing in their cultural and western learning and wellbeing. Data demonstrates that children who are strong in their first cultural learning and knowledge are

stronger in key domains of western learning. Children are increasing their nutritional intake, learning the skills for self-regulation, and showing improvements in their social/emotional wellbeing and physical health. They are building health knowledge and exhibiting healthy behaviours and health agency from their earliest years.

As outlined by Moore, et al (2024), there are “core care conditions” for children and families that are essential for children to grow, develop and flourish.<sup>16</sup> These “...core care conditions have a cumulative synergistic impact – the more we can put in place, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes”.<sup>17</sup> Evaluation evidence demonstrated that Children's Ground effectively engaged and supported both children and families in these conditions, and provided regular opportunities to build the cumulative impact and strengthen the foundations for long-term change.

One of the more powerful outcomes evidenced in the evaluation is the level at which families are involved with and 'walking alongside their children'. Families are the greatest influence on a child's development, and evidence suggests that the greater their positive engagement, the greater the positive impact is for the child.<sup>18 19</sup> Families are demonstrating greater engagement in their children's lives as well as strengthening their own lives in areas of health, wellbeing, employment, and social and cultural connectedness.

The most striking outcome for families has been engagement in employment. Children's Ground's employment model has engaged people in employment who have never or rarely been in paid employment. This is in contrast with negative employment trends for First Nations people across the Northern Territory.

13 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank. 2021. Loud and Clear: Effective Language of Instruction Policies for Learning; A World Bank Policy Approach Paper.

14 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2012. Why Languages Matter for the Millennium Development Goals; UNESCO Bangkok Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.

15 UNESCO. 2021. Global action plan of the international decade of indigenous languages (IDIL2022-2032).

16 Moore, T. 2024. Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. Report. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2>.

17 *ibid*.

18 Hirschfeld, G., & Hennig, T. (2020). The Influence of Parental Involvement on Children's Educational Success: A Review of Recent Studies. *Educational Psychology Review*, 32(2), 209-225. doi:10.1007/s10648-020-09503-0.

19 Olsen, S. F., & Fuller, A. (2008). Family Influences on Child Development: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 49(5), 499-507. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2008.01912.x.

The evaluation evidenced the benefits of employment for children, young people and adults within family groups and households. For example, children with family members employed with Children's Ground are progressing further in their learning compared with children without family employed. More children are now living in families where parents and carers are working. For many younger children, seeing family members working is their lived experience.

Through the evaluation, empowerment has been evidenced as a key driver for change. Children's Ground's community governance structures and processes placed families in the centre as decision-makers in design and delivery.

While outcomes for communities will be achieved over the long term, evaluation evidence demonstrated that the foundations and early building blocks to create population- and community-level change are being put in place by Children's Ground. These include: engaging close to a critical mass (75%) of children and families in communities; establishing and strengthening local governance and intergenerational leadership; establishing Children's Ground as a place of safety for everyone – held and led by First Nations staff and families; strengthening family relationships; and building and growing cultural and social capital within communities.

Re-establishing self-determination is a long-term, intergenerational process. Evaluation evidence demonstrated that, through the ten principles and deliberate processes and practices, Children's Ground contributed to increased confidence, voice and self-determination for people.

Collectively, over six years, Children's Ground has evidenced a changing status quo for children and families. As the current generation of children grow into adulthood, they will become the majority of families and people in their communities. They will have seen and experienced increased equity, cultural empowerment and opportunity, which has the potential to create significant positive impacts for future generations.

Key outcomes are being achieved and the foundations for long-term change for children, families, and community are in place. Continuity and stability over the full 25-year commitment to the CG Approach are essential to ensure quality, sustainability, and the extension of impact.

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that Children's Ground is achieving and progressing service and systems reform through First Nations-led design, delivery and leadership, and achieving positive outcomes in key areas where governments are struggling strategically, systematically and in achieving Closing the Gap outcomes, particularly in the Northern Territory.

The evidence in this report highlights the impact in Central Australian communities, and all levels of government, particularly in light of the recommendations from the Productivity Commission's 2024 'Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap' systems reform.

“This is our organisation, where we can be together and to remember to keep it good so that young people can be happy with their children. We wanted to make this Children's Ground. It's a place for looking after our children and the country.”

*65+ years, Female, First Nations staff/family member, 2023*

# First Nations conclusion

**People are working together, the families and communities working together with their children is a major thing. We see the difference it makes. Because we've got all these families and different age groups all being a part of the early learning process for children and part of Children's Ground. This is how the old people wanted it – a holistic approach and intergenerational learning and health and families together.**

The Elders have worked hard towards this all these years. And now there is a place set up, which is Children's Ground now, with a hub for everyone. And then there's the communities that are part of it, that are doing the teaching of language and culture and western education, which is how they wanted it. It's happening.

And it's a slow process, but it has that longitudinal value in it – how people want it. It's not going to happen overnight, but Children's Ground is a process that is there and it's happening in small steps. Sometimes things get slow because so many things happen with families and communities. There are some setbacks, but it's always continuing, it never really stops. Some parts might slow for a bit, but other parts will keep going. And it's that rotating thing with all the families. If one family has things going on, they might stop for a bit, but other families will keep going, will keep carrying it, and then bring those other families back in.

There is a process, and it's going to take a while and need support, long-term support to sustain it. We need sustainability to continue this process that has started now. And that's like the system for change for First Nations people.

We don't claim to be everything or have all the knowledge or have all the answers. But this is what we know, what our families know – and we know how to do it with our children and families. And this is the way we are trying to help our own families. But it's not going to be at a pace that other people understand – this is going to take generations, and we are a part of that now, because we can't leave it any longer.

Twenty years from now we want to see this as a new norm. We know this is what works for our families, because this is what the families have been asking for – more language and culture to make people's identities strong. And that is everything, it's the health, the education – you can't fix things in silos – it's the whole being of people, everything in their life. It's to break that cycle of poverty. And it might seem small at the moment, but even having one role model in your family is important and as we get bigger, there will be two, three, four role models.

There are small changes, and it's to do with the people themselves that are making the difference. It's First Nations people from the grassroots who are living it – they are the ones making those changes. And there are always solutions prescribed to them by everybody else, but this solution is from the people, they've said this is what we need. And it comes back to that deep listening with people – to hear them – not just come with what you think is the solution.



# Western conclusion

**This evaluation demonstrates that Children's Ground's 25-year strategy continues to progress, delivering impactful change and systems reform for First Nations children, families and communities.**

Despite challenges such as COVID and the funding limitations that have necessitated the growth model, Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe has made substantial strides in community engagement and service delivery. First Nations governance, the increased involvement of children in early learning, the integration of cultural and western education, and the significant rise in First Nations employment are clear indicators of positive momentum.

The data shows that Children's Ground has successfully engaged families and communities in meaningful ways, creating safe, supportive environments that foster participation and empowerment. With evidence of improved health outcomes, enhanced cultural learning and stronger family connections, the foundation for long-term systemic change is being solidly built.

While Children's Ground is still without adequate resourcing to implement the full comprehensive whole-of-community CG Approach, and is only in year six of a 25-year strategy, the model has established and is continuing to grow an evidence base for achieving First Nations-led generational change. Over six years and two evaluation reports of the CG Approach in Central Australia, Children's Ground has evidenced a changing status quo for children and families.



# Research Advisory Group endorsement

November 2024

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, 2020 to 2022**

We congratulate the Children's Ground team on delivering the second evaluation report for Central Australia, Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, Children's Ground in Central Australia, 2020 to 2022.

This report was reviewed by our Research Advisory Group as an independent body committed to interrogating data, findings, analysis and evaluative judgements. We have provided advice and guidance for this evaluation report and express our confidence in the rigour of this evaluation.

The evaluation process and analysis were robust and included a high quality and participatory method that promotes First Nations data and evaluation sovereignty.

We commend the report and the commitment of Children's Ground to contribute to a critical evidence base that will benefit systems design, policy, practice, and cultural standards.

Children's Ground has made significant progress in evaluating the impact of the Children's Ground Approach and evidencing generational change.

While the report identifies that some of the progress indicators have yet to be achieved, as a Research Advisory Group we were impressed by the progress evidenced throughout the report. Not only is there progress in key areas such as early childhood education and employment, but it is also the broad impact across a range of areas which collectively indicate that the Approach is providing an integrated system driven at a local level that is making a difference in the lives of children, families and communities. The evidence is compelling.

We wish to communicate to the local Governance and leadership of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia) that the work they are undertaking and evolving is groundbreaking. The Children's Ground Approach is somewhat unique in its comprehensive whole of community nature. Through the extensive and wide range of work, you are seeing outcomes for children and families. This is even more impressive given the impact of COVID-19 and ongoing grief and sorry business experienced by communities – and your achievements go beyond service delivery and include governance and your extensive community-led research and evaluation as well.

The report is like peeling an onion. There are layers and layers of work and evidence that build to a whole picture of change. You are getting very high engagement of children and importantly their families. This whole of family approach is a significant strength and one of the hallmarks of the Children's Ground Approach. Understanding the importance of families for the wellbeing of children and placing this in the context of the whole community is ambitious and as this report demonstrates, is working. It follows the leadership of First Nations people and culture and builds on strengths and capacity and empowers the adults around the children – and that is what is often missing in other services and programs.

Government reports, recommendations and extensive evidence says we need to empower local people. This is rarely achieved, but Children's Ground is an example of local empowerment working in practice, and it demonstrated in this evaluation by the numbers of parents, carers and family involved and the ways they are involved and participating. They are involved in delivery and in decision making, with hundreds of people participating as part of the collective decision making. Empowerment and engagement are further evidenced in the employment of local people. This powerful outcome has been seen in the evaluation as having a direct impact on the engagement and wellbeing and development of children.

Another important finding is the broader systems engagement that Children's Ground is growing. Part of the Approach is both coordination and building bridges and improved access to existing services. The evidence indicates that families are engaging with other local services including people managing and being proactive with their own health. This is an important 'value add' to existing local services.

The importance of the flexibility of the model comes through clearly from the staff and family quotes. The flexibility to centre a child and family and be responsive to their needs and 'do what is needed' is a strength of the model.

Children's Ground is a powerful story because it moves beyond traditional approaches of funding discrete or siloed programs. The cumulative impact of Children's Ground working with children and their families and across education, health and employment is what is driving impact. This has the potential for significant and enduring change over time. Engagement numbers are very high, and you have staff and families reporting that there are some people missing out. People want even more, and this comes through so strongly in the full report.

The Children's Ground model is a differentiated model. It is intentional. The First Nations design is deliberate and there is much that others can learn from. The intentional and intergenerational model and investing in culture and in children and their families over a generation is important to achieve sustained change.

It is evident in your first and second Central Australian evaluation reports that Children's Ground has done the hard work of starting small and building financial resources over time. Over this period, you have established and increased service delivery with diverse buckets of funding. You acknowledge throughout the report that this is a growth model and therefore limited in impact. But resource limitations should not overshadow the impact that Children's Ground has had. What has been achieved in this growth model phase over only a short period of time is phenomenal. The practice evidence and leadership demonstrated is broad and deep.

Your struggle for financial resources and your vision for the next phase is clear throughout this report. This second evaluation report provides further evidence to demonstrate the Children's Ground Approach is a worthwhile investment. It is an Approach we would encourage Governments to invest in to secure the resources at scale and to provide sustainability to this important work.

As researchers and evaluators working in some of Australia's leading research institutions, we commend Children's Ground for establishing and enacting an evaluation and outcomes framework planned and implemented from the outset, as well as your commitment to public transparency of the successes and challenges of the developing model over the long term. This is an example of leading practice that should be implemented across all service and program delivery for First Nations and non-First Nations initiatives.

Kind regards,

**Children's Ground Independent Research Advisory Group**

**Professor Sally Brinkman:** Professor of Education and Paediatric Epidemiology, University of South Australia

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

**Professor David Thomas:** Public Health Research (tobacco control and housing), Menzies School of Health Research

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

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