

Evaluation of **Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe** Children's Ground in Central Australia 2020-2022



children's
ground

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The vision of Children's Ground came from Arrernte Elders in Central Australia. We love, respect, cherish and sincerely thank all the Elders who lead Children's Ground – past and present.

Children's Ground would like to acknowledge and thank all the Elders, leaders, families and communities of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe who own and hold the long-term vision; and govern, lead, work and participate every day to make the vision a reality for children.

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia) is held by our Elders. At Children's Ground, First Nations and non-First Nations staff have been taught, guided and mentored in a six-year apprenticeship under these founding Elders. They set the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), the outcomes and the standards that underpin this evaluation. Members of the next generation are now stepping into their role as Elders, bringing their life experience and knowledge to continue the oldest knowledge systems in the world for future generations.

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collect data and stories are critical to Children's Ground evaluating and evidencing systems change and impact.

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Your vision and support provide the ongoing space for innovation and systems reform led by First Nations leaders, families and community members across Central Australia.

Beyond your funding, the way you support us enabled us to grow into what we see today - a thriving First Nations organisation, leading a First Nations approach to changing the future for the next generation.

You will see where you, our partners, are represented in the painting of Children's Ground.

You have allowed self-determination. With integrity, you have supported us without controlling us.

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

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“

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.

”

INGKERRKELE ARNTARNT-AREME, AMPE-KENHE AHELHE
GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE, 2022

FOREWORD

Children's Ground Elders, families, staff and Board proudly present our second evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, Children's Ground in Central Australia.

Children's Ground is one of a few not-for-profit organisations in Australia that provide a public evaluation of our work. This is our commitment to our communities and to our funding partners. It is how we track our progress, how we learn and how we grow.

Our vision is ambitious: Systems Change. To achieve this, we are implementing a new system: the Children's Ground Approach, a First Nations systems design. Each step in implementing a new system presents important learnings, experiences, challenges and opportunities. The evaluations allow us to analyse each of these so that we can adjust and strengthen this system to ensure that we can achieve the long-term change and outcomes that our leaders have envisioned.

We have a 25-year strategy for reform. We have a fully budgeted and articulated system design which to date has not been fully funded,

so we are growing this reform from the grassroots up. This is the second evaluation report from Central Australia, marking six years of this journey.

This evaluation presents the numbers and the stories – the quantitative and qualitative. It shows that we are creating reform and seeing change and that we have achieved the foundations for long-term benefit for children and families. The results show that the Children's Ground Approach is delivering and leading and best practice in addressing whole of community inequity and disadvantage. It shows that the Children's Ground Approach provides a tangible response to the recommendations from the Productivity Commission's review of Closing the Gap and years of government reports. It shows that the Children's Ground Approach is achieving change in key Closing the Gap targets.

We start early at Children's Ground with the little ones. We include everyone in the family, because that is the First Nations way. The evidence in this report reflects what we see on the ground each day. We see the excitement and joy in children who are engaged in learning. We see the pride in young people and adults who are working. We



see the strength in culture and the respect for Elders and each other. In this evaluation, as on the ground, we see the incredible strengthening of governance, voice and confidence in community leadership.

Most striking to me, in reviewing this evaluation, are the voices of the community. We could not include them all. When I read the impact on people's lives, through their own voices, I know we are on the right path.

This is a long report because this is a comprehensive system change approach, which requires comprehensive evaluation.

There is a summary report that can also be accessed at childrensground.org.au.

Thank you, and I hope this report shows that system change is possible.

WILLIAM TILMOUTH

**CHILDREN'S GROUND
CO-FOUNDER AND CHAIR
OF BOARD**

AKNGERRAPATE (ELDERS)

“If it wasn’t for our Elders none of us would be here. That’s why we’re here. We’re following them.”

THE INGKERREKELE ARNTARNTÉ-AREME
(FIRST NATIONS GOVERNANCE
CENTRAL AUSTRALIA), 2023



Children’s Ground did not start up overnight or over a couple of years. It has been in the making for years. It’s what the old people have always dreamed of. It’s something they always carried with them throughout their life and journey. Being cultural leaders and wanting this [Children’s Ground] to happen.

And it’s here now and it’s their legacy, what they left behind. That’s what people need to come to realise and understand, that history of it – because it hasn’t been thought of overnight, it’s what they’ve [Elders] seen throughout their

lives of how families started going in different directions, moving away from language and culture, and not having that being on country, and teachings and kinship. This is what they always wanted. That is why they started Children’s Ground. They knew what needed to happen.

Akngerrapate (Elders) are the key authority for our people. This is how our governance works. First Nations governance is embedded across the Children’s Ground Approach. Akngerrapate are the most senior voice in Children’s Ground governance and leadership. They have a critical role in holding the cultural integrity of the organisation and its operations.

In addition to their cultural authority, the Elders leading

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe have a fifty-year history of educational and community leadership. They were key architects of Children’s Ground. They set clear direction to centre First Nations systems of knowledge, language and practice. They set clear goals relating to the protection and strengthening of language and culture, identifying risks and strategies. They were resolute about the establishment of education and wellbeing for the next generation of children, making sure that culture and language were in the centre of Children’s Ground and that learning and life were led from the land.

Three of the founding Elders of Children’s Ground died within or just after this evaluation period.



WORDS FROM OUR ELDERS...

“

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

“Arrernte language always came last in the education system. It was their words first. But now, here, we've got an opportunity to do this.”

“This is where my heart is. We are doing it our way. This is where the wheels are turning around. We will stay on this straight road. We are recognising the pathway forward and learning from where we've been. We all work together and walk together on the same track.”

DR M.K. TURNER, OAM, ARRERNTE
PROFESSOR, ELDER AND LAW WOMAN,
AMPE-KENHE AHELHE DIRECTOR,
CHILDREN'S GROUND

“You've got to tell the right story. It is important to get this right. It has to start with the Elders. If we don't do it now, it will all be lost.”



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

"We are the Elders, you know. We have the responsibility for our young kids to learn and to show them bush ways. And how we live in town. Because our way [bush ways] and living in town are two different ways of living a life. We feel proud of passing down our language and culture to our next generation and the generation to come... And they've been doing really, really good work."

"...getting this homeland back, starting this Children's Ground, that was a freedom for us, where all the old people can talk, tell the stories of what happened in the past about them, how they lived, and so that was the freedom for them and for us. So, we can just get that language and culture taught by them, for us, so we can pass it down."

KWEMENTYAYE RYDER
AMPE-KENHE AHELHE DIRECTOR,
CHILDREN'S GROUND



A while ago, M.K. and I were sitting under an athenge (Ironwood tree), just talking about our children's future. We talked about how many people we have asked for help to get a school going for our kids but it's never happened. Kids want to see something different. They need an education that is more than sitting down with pen and paper in a classroom. The land is their classroom. We have to help those kids find a better place to learn. And Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe [Children's Ground] is the best."

"Kids are learning about the old ways and the new ways. The cultural activities are really important. And no feeling shame. They need to feel proud of who they are."

"A lot of exciting things are happening and new families are joining in. I feel really happy. Sometimes I look at all the children and think 'Wow! This has just spread like wildfire!' All those years ago we started Children's Ground little bit by little bit. And now look at this! I'm very proud."

KWEMENTYAYE KNGWARREYE PALMER
AMPE-KENHE AHELHE DIRECTOR,
CHILDREN'S GROUND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS

This report is the second evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground) - Central Australia, evaluating the delivery of the Children's Ground Approach from 2020-2022. This report builds on the first evaluation from 2017-19, analysing progress and impact from 2020 to 2022 and over the full six-year implementation period from 2017 to 2022.

This report evaluates how delivery of the Children's Ground Approach evolved during the period (process evaluation) and reports on progress and impact against the 25-year Evaluation Framework (impact evaluation). The CG Approach is also analysed against the evidence-based drivers of long-term sustained change for children, families and communities.

ABOUT CHILDREN'S GROUND

Children's Ground is a First Nations not-for-profit organisation, established to implement a new First Nations-designed service system, known as the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach).

The CG Approach is a 25-year strategy that centres First Nations systems of governance and knowledge, combining these with leading Western practice and international evidence. The integrated service system delivers education, health, employment, economic and community development with a focus on prevention. Cultural knowledge and practice are embedded across all areas.

The CG Approach starts with children and grows with them and their families from birth through to adulthood.

It is a whole community approach tailored to the specific needs of each community. It is evidence based, with impact monitored through a 25-year longitudinal evaluation.

Local First Nations leadership is the cornerstone of the CG Approach, with operations designed, delivered, and evaluated by local communities. The CG Approach addresses the key social, cultural and economic determinants of life-long opportunity and wellbeing.

In Central Australia, Children's Ground is known as Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe and is led by First Nations families and Elders across four communities in and around Alice Springs (Mparntwe).

GROWING AND EVALUATING AMPE-KENHE AHELHE IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe was established in 2017 by Arrernte Elders and the communities of Irrkerlantye (Whitegate Town Camp), Mpweringke Anapipe (outstations/homelands north of Alice Springs), Yarrenyty Arltere (Larapinta Valley Town Camp), and Uyenpere Atwatye (Hidden Valley Town Camp). Operations have been delivered since 2017 through a 'growth model' that has evolved incrementally as resources increased.

During this evaluation period, operations grew in almost all key areas of the CG Approach, in line with income growth. However, it has not yet reached the level required to deliver the full CG Approach. Throughout this evaluation period the 'growth model' continued, with a focus on building equitable access and engagement as the foundation for 25 years of delivery. This included working across the four communities to:

- Strengthen local First Nations governance.
- Increase and embed access and delivery of learning, family health, community development, economic development and cultural knowledge and practice.
- Strengthen whole of community life by increasing engagement of children, young people and families in all areas of the CG Approach, towards a critical mass (at least 75%) of children and their families in each community.
- Strengthen and mature organisational systems and processes.
- Increase funding and resources.

This evaluation reports progress against two longitudinal evaluation frameworks:

1. A western evaluation framework (see page 37).
2. A First Nations cultural evaluation framework (see page 39).

This report evaluates process effectiveness against the ten practice principles as the intent of the CG Approach, and reports on change and impact against progress measures across ten long-term outcomes for children, families and communities.

The report also evaluates progress against First Nations design of the CG Approach with analysis undertaken by First Nations people.

This evaluation reports on the following evaluation questions, presented as key sections throughout the report:

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

The evaluation approach and method can be found in Section 2.3 of this report.



SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The evidence clearly demonstrates that the communities leading the CG Approach have made important progress in key areas of early childhood education, health, employment, culture and local empowerment.

The evaluation data shows positive changes including large increases in the number of children engaged in early learning and adult employment. Success has been built on strong community leadership.



“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

Impact for Children

Starting early, children aged 0-5 years are experiencing a ‘new normal’, with increased engagement in culturally-centred early learning and health promotion. Many children participating in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe are seeing family members employed for the first time.

IMPACT: MORE CHILDREN ARE ENGAGED IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

- 57% increase in children aged 0-5 years engaged in early learning, from 223 children in 2017-19 to 351 in 2020-22.
- Before the establishment of Children’s Ground, only 14% of children 0-8 years had engaged in early years learning. Now, that figure is 68%.

IMPACT: CHILDREN ARE HEALTHIER

- Children’s engagement in nutritional intake and health promotion has almost doubled between the first and second evaluation period, from 228 children aged 0-8 years in 2017-19 to 452 in 2020-22.
- 87% of families reported that children’s physical and emotional health and wellbeing have improved (n=24).

IMPACT: CHILDREN ARE PROGRESSING IN THEIR CULTURAL AND WESTERN LEARNING

- The data confirms that children who are strong in cultural learning are stronger in key Western learning domains.
- It also shows children with a parent/carer employed at Children’s Ground are stronger in both cultural and Western learning.
- More than double the number of children have been engaged in Learning on Country since the last evaluation, from 137 children aged 0-8 years in 2017-19 to 351 in 2020-22.

“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

Impact for Families

Through Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, people who have experienced long-term unemployment or never worked are now employed. Families are walking alongside their children in their learning and wellbeing.

IMPACT: FAMILIES ARE WORKING

- 83 local First Nations people were employed as part of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe between 2020 and 2022.
- 31% of First Nations staff employed at Children’s Ground (from 2017-22) had never worked in paid employment. 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.

IMPACT: FAMILIES ARE ACTIVELY ENGAGING IN HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Between 2020 and 2022, 914 family members were engaged in health promotion and support, including young people 9-17 years and adults 18+ years – an 88% increase from 487 in 2017-19.
- 88% of staff/family members interviewed reported easier access to services for children’s physical health since Children’s Ground started, and 78% reported easier service access for children’s emotional health (n=24).

IMPACT: FAMILIES ARE WALKING ALONGSIDE THEIR CHILDREN

- Since Children’s Ground started there has been a 63% increase in adult family members engaging in learning and health promotion alongside their children, from 319 adults aged 18+ years in 2017-19 to 519 in 2020-22.
- 100% of children engaged alongside their family.

“...just feeling proud that I’m doing stuff for my children and my families. I’m teaching. Trying to be a good role model for the kids and for families, to be young leader too.”

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

Impact for Communities

Achieving the envisioned community outcomes is expected to take the full 25 years of the CG Approach as the current generation of children become adults and start their own families. Six years into the CG Approach, the foundations of community-level change are being established, with increases in feelings of empowerment, safety and leadership.

IMPACT: INCREASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- 1,415 people were engaged in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe from 2020-2022, a 45% increase from 978 in 2017-19.
- 78% of people in Children’s Ground communities were engaged in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe. Engaging the majority of community is a key driver of community-level change over the long-term.

IMPACT: INCREASED EMPOWERMENT

- There was an 84% increase in people engaged in First Nations governance and decision-making, with 197 people engaged in 2020-22, up from 107 in 2017-19.

IMPACT: INCREASED SAFETY

- 100% of staff and family members interviewed reported Children’s Ground was a “safe place” (n=21).

“I think there’s a lot of pride that Children’s Ground does that [First Nations governance] and holds that pretty much at the centre of all of the things we do, and there is that pride of Children’s Ground is ours.”

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

FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary Analysis

Analysis of qualitative evaluation data from interviews with staff and family members was undertaken by 20 First Nations staff. The following is a snapshot of some key findings and analysis.

ALTYEKE ARTWEYENGARTWEYE AKALTYIRREME (Intergenerational learning):

Analysis: 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 – together.

MWERREWERN IRREPIRREME (Positive changes for kids and families):

Analysis: 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. The families are engaging with health too, learning and supporting their children and whole family to be healthier.

APURTELHILEME TYERRTYE AREYE (Bringing everyone together, everyone leading together):

Analysis: Together everyone is leading the way. People are being leaders. Role modelling for the next generation and teaching the next generation. 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.

AKALTYELENTHME (Knowledge sharing and ownership):

Analysis: We are sharing, teaching and learning our language and culture. We are responsible. We are feeling proud and happy that we are doing our work, our way. You've got to have First Nations staff to be First Nations led.



It's important to see someone from community with language, with culture, with lived experience, leading us here. These are the right people for the job.

AMPE-KENHE AHELHE APELE APMERE ARTEKE (Children's Ground is home):

Analysis: Children's Ground is home for all of us, communities, staff, families and children. It is a safe place for everyone. People don't see it as a school or a service, instead, we see it as home, as a safe place. We feel good in ourselves.

ARREKWERLKWERLE (Starting early):

Analysis: Families are standing together. Everyone is coming together for our children and families to make our culture and communities strong. Families are walking together. We are standing together – staying proud and strong.

Summary Conclusion

Families and communities are working together with their children, this 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 we have Children's Ground.

It's a slow process, but it has that longitudinal value in it – how people want it.

It's not going to happen overnight, because Children's Ground is a process that is there and it's happening in small steps. It's going to take a while and need support, long-term support to sustain it.

There are small changes. It's First Nations people from the grassroots who are living it – they are the ones making those changes. 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.



WESTERN ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary Analysis

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

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that a new norm is emerging after six years. Early childhood learning, nutrition, health and wellbeing promotion and engagement are now a consistent experience for children in the four communities leading the CG Approach. Evaluation evidence shows that prior to Children's Ground, access and engagement were challenging and culturally centred learning and wellbeing were not available.

Through culturally centred delivery, children are now growing up with First Nations approaches to learning, health and development, which western evidence links to greater success in educational outcomes, and contributes more broadly to the country's economic, social and political life.^{1 2 3}

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 further developed in key domains of western learning. Children are increasing their nutritional intake, are learning healthy routines/behaviours and are showing improvements in their social/emotional wellbeing and physical health.

1 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.

2 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.

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

They are building cultural and western health knowledge and exhibiting healthy behaviours and health agency from their earliest years.

Through the evaluation, empowerment was a theme that was strongly articulated by First Nations staff and families and has been evidenced as a key driver for change. Children's Ground's community governance structures and processes have placed families in the centre as decision-makers in design, delivery and evaluation. Community leadership and governance includes 'daily governance' with children and families (as 'service users'). From the outset, local First Nations governance established key policies. For example, all children who engage in early learning and wellbeing must be accompanied by an adult family member(s). Children learn from Elders, other important cultural teachers and family, and alongside other children older and younger. This is considered one of the foundational building blocks to sustained improvements in outcomes over time and is consistent with western evidence and First Nations leading practice.^{4 5}

Evaluation evidence demonstrates the family conditions that children are growing up in are being strengthened. Families are more involved in their children's education and wellbeing, as well as families strengthening their own health, wellbeing, social and cultural connectedness. Further, 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. Evaluation data showed that children with family members employed with Children's Ground are progressing further in their learning compared with children without employed family members.

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

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that the integrated, comprehensive approach of Children's Ground effectively engaged children and families in the core care conditions recognised in research as critical for long term change.⁶ As outlined by Moore, et al (2024) these conditions "...have a cumulative synergistic impact – the more we can put in place, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes."⁷

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. This includes: engaging a critical mass (78%) 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; strengthening family relationships; and growing cultural and social capital within communities.

Summary 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-19 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.

⁶ 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.26065597v2>.
⁷ *ibid*

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, enhanced cultural learning and stronger family connections, the foundation for long-term systemic change is being solidly built.

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

Collectively, over six years, Children's Ground's systems reform has contributed to 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 who have seen and experienced improved equity, cultural empowerment and opportunity.



VOICE OF FAMILIES — STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT AND CHANGE

THESE QUOTES REPRESENT 11 DIFFERENT
FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY VOICES.

"We was at home. A usual day was just stay at home... until Children's Ground came along. I'm just feeling proud that I'm doing stuff for my children and my families. I'm teaching. Trying to be a good role model for the kids and for families, to be young leader too... I just love the work."

20-30 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I feel like I've grown a lot in this last two years than I have over the last ten years... because of Children's Ground but also like there's been so much happening in the COVID and deaths and all that. But also, I think a big part of it is how Children's Ground was throughout all of that hard times. I could have walked away because of the deaths in the family and just wanting to chuck everything in. The same with COVID and stuff, it was a scary time, but the way Children's Ground handled it, it made me feel safe to be here, wanted to be here and I think this is where I need to be."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I used to make money to drink. But now, I make money to live."

40-50 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"It 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

"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

"I feel really happy here and also with my leadership. Not only for my own leadership but for the young people who have their leadership with us, with me."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I wanted to become part and I wanted to say something. What I see about Children's Ground, about the kids, they change. And I felt very proud inside me, you know. Children's Ground gave me 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 and I want to come out more and more. 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

"For me, I was off work for a long time... so when I heard about Children's Ground, they gave me that chance, like come back and work. And... made me feel good about myself. Made me feel like hey, you're the person you're meant to be. Step up now. It opened my eyes, Children's Ground. Because everybody was saying, 'You're this and this, you're the leader.' I was the leader but now I've got two other leaders...and I'm very proud of them too because their life story is - we all have a dog life - now it's changing, even for our aunties and stuff, to see them step up and they were always the leaders. But to see them actually writing and reading in Arrernte, that makes me proud."

40-50 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"Makes you feel like you've got a voice, you're being heard, you know, any other organisation you wouldn't have that voice. Yep, that's where I've got my confidence."

30-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I feel really strong with Children's Ground."

45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023



A GUIDE FOR READERS

This evaluation report is a long document. It analyses the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) and system. It gives a detailed analysis of this system on outcomes for children, families and communities.

To give context to the analysis, the first part of the document (Sections 1-3) introduces readers to the CG Approach and the implementation, development and context for the Central Australia region.

Sections 4 presents the core evaluation and analysis of the progress and impact of the CG Approach. The analysis includes western First Nations perspectives. Section 4 is separated into the process analysis and the impact analysis:

- The process analysis evaluates how and if the CG Approach has been implemented against Children's Ground's ten practice principles effectively and implemented with integrity and as intended. The evaluation analyses each principle and whether they have been implemented individually and collectively as intended. The strategy of the CG Approach is that all principles must be implemented in full, effectively and together to achieve systemic change.
- The impact analysis evaluates impact against the Children's Ground evaluation framework

progress indicators and outcomes for children, families and communities.

Section 5 is a systems change analysis, assessing how the CG Approach is enabling and impacting systems change.

There is some repetition through the report due to the comprehensive nature of the evaluation across a range of inter-related measures. This repetition ensures that readers who may not read the whole report have a full context for each key section.

Readers will engage with the document in different ways. The contents page will guide you to the areas of greatest interest and relevance for you.

There is also a summary report available at childrensground.org.au

The following is a summary outline of this evaluation report.

REPORT OUTLINE

The report is presented in five sections:

- **SECTION 1:** Introduction.
- **SECTION 2:** About this evaluation.
- **SECTION 3:** Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground Central Australia).

- **SECTION 4:** Evaluation findings and analysis (from First Nations and western perspectives).

- **SECTION 5:** Systems change analysis and discussion.

- **CONCLUSIONS** (First Nations and western).

A NOTE FOR READERS:

At Children's Ground, the terms 'western' and 'cultural' are used to differentiate between knowledge, systems, practices and protocols that are either from First Nations people and perspectives (cultural) or reflect current mainstream services, systems and knowledge (western). These are plain language terms that have enabled a shared cross-cultural understanding and communication of differences. While the term 'western' is not a fully reflective term, it is how our First Nations community differentiate between knowledge systems. It is recognised that the terms 'dominant' and 'non-dominant' are also commonly used globally. However, this report has used the terms 'western' and 'cultural' to remain consistent with Children's Ground's internal plain language approach.

Note: A Glossary of Terms can be found in Appendix 1.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

This report is the second evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground) - Central Australia, evaluating the delivery of the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) from 2020 to 2022. This report builds on the first evaluation from 2017 to 2019.

The CG Approach is a First Nations designed systems solution to achieve life-long wellbeing and end intergenerational inequity, exclusion and complex disadvantage.

Led by First Nations people at the community and regional level, the CG Approach is a 25-year strategy that aims to establish the foundations and pathways to create generational change over time.

The CG Approach addresses structural, cultural, social, economic and material needs required for children and families in any community to thrive. While governments and historical service systems separate and silo services and supports, the CG Approach integrates all elements of wellbeing (learning, health, economic, community and cultural) and centres First

Nations cultural knowledge, practices and systems at the heart of community design. A key focus is supporting strong and resilient relationships among community members and strengthening the foundations of culture, language and shared responsibility between generations.

In practice, the CG Approach is implemented in diverse First Nations contexts and communities. Through evidence and leading practice, the shared aim is to evolve a system by First peoples that can benefit all: First Nations people and communities nationally and internationally plus contribute to wider change of public policies and service systems over time. Further details about the CG Approach are outlined next.

Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe was established in 2017 by Arrernte Elders and the communities of Irrkerlantye (Whitegate Town Camp), Mpweringke Anapipe (outstations/homelands north of Alice Springs), Yarrenyty Arltere (Larapinta Valley Town Camp), and in 2019 with Uyenpere Atwatye (Hidden Valley Town Camp). See Section 3: Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (Children's Ground in Central Australia) for further information.

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

The growth model is an incremental strategy. The full CG Approach provides a comprehensive and holistic suite of services and supports required to change the future for the current generation of children (see Section 1 and Appendix 2 for details of the full CG Approach). The growth model evolves and expands the CG Approach as funding increases.

During this evaluation period, resources increased, but not to the level required to deliver the full CG Approach. Therefore, the 'growth model' continued through this evaluation. Further information about the establishment and growth of the CG Approach in Central Australia is detailed in Section 3.

This second evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe analyses progress and impact from 2020 to 2022 and over the full six-year implementation period from 2017 to 2022. It evaluates how delivery of the CG Approach evolved during the period (process evaluation) and reports on progress and impact against the 25-year Evaluation Framework (impact evaluation). The CG Approach is also analysed against the evidence-based drivers of long-term sustained change for children, families and communities.

This evaluation report assesses the development and impact of the CG Approach 'growth model' in the context of the full CG Approach. The evaluation should be read within this context, noting the importance of the full model in achieving the strategic and operational change and impact. It should also be noted that COVID-19 significantly impacted delivery during this evaluation period.

1.1: THE CHILDREN'S GROUND APPROACH

The design of the Children's Ground Approach grew out of decades of work and leadership by First Nations people in Central Australia. It is a First Nations-centred system to achieve long term, sustained change for children and families to enjoy equity, opportunity and wellbeing at a whole of community level.

The CG Approach places the child in the centre. Elders and families identified what they want for children as they emerge into adulthood: strength in their culture, language and identity, success in education, health, happiness and being settled in their spirit, connection to and safety in their community, understanding of their responsibilities and

employment in work that is fulfilling and where income meets their needs.

The CG Approach was designed to integrate all the key elements to achieve these outcomes for all children living in a community.

Children's Ground was incubated by the Australian Government in 2011 as an innovative approach to implementing and evidencing systems reform, focused on achieving long term outcomes with First Nations people.



The CG Approach is a comprehensive impact delivery framework combining both First Nations and western (global) leading practice and evidence. It embraces the understanding that systemic change is a generational process and that for change to occur and be sustained, the conditions for this must be built and held over time.

Children's Ground draws from the expertise of First Nations leaders and a practice system that has evolved over 65,000 years. It also draws from decades of academic research and policy and an evidence base that recognises the critical importance of culturally informed practice and the centring of culture as necessary drivers for systems change and child, family and community wellbeing.^{8 9 10 11}



⁸ Marika, R. 1999. Milthun latju wangaromgu Yolŋu: Valuing Yolŋu knowledge in the education system. *Ngoonjook: A Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, 16 (December), 107-120.

⁹ Fatima, Y. *et al.* 2022. Cultural Identity and Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children. In: Baxter, J; Lam, J; Povey, J; Lee, R; Zubrick, SR. (eds) *Family Dynamics over the Life Course. Life Course Research and Social Policies*, vol 15. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12224-8_4.

¹⁰ Smith, G. 2003. *Indigenous Struggle for the Transformation of Education and Schooling*.

¹¹ Verbunt, E, Luke, J, Paradies, Y *et al.* 2021. Cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – a narrative overview of reviews. *Int J Equity Health* 20, 181. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01514-2>.

Children's Ground's Vision:

First Nations people across Australia have self-determination and enjoy social, cultural, political and economic justice.

Our next generation of children know and celebrate their culture and identity, have freedom of choice and expression and can live with opportunity, peace, harmony and wellbeing.

Australians recognise our shared history and celebrate First Nations culture and strength.

VERBUNT, ET AL FOUND THAT:

"Family/Community, Country and place, cultural identity and self-determination were strongly identified across reviews as having a positive impact on the health and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal peoples."

The CG Approach is consistent with research and leading practice on intergenerational and complex disadvantage; and systems that can respond effectively to multiple coexisting factors of influence. The conditions, experiences and opportunities that all children, families and communities need for wellbeing are well evidenced and demonstrate that the cultural, health, educational, social and economic wellbeing of families and communities shape the conditions that children need to thrive.^{2 3 4 5 6}

Therefore, the CG Approach is designed to place the child at the centre of a whole of family and community place-based approach, working at the child, family and community level at all times.

The assumption behind the CG Approach is that, with the right conditions, whole communities can shift from complex and entrenched intergenerational disadvantage to achieve wellbeing and opportunity – culturally, economically, socially and politically.



1 Verbunt, E; Luke, J; Paradies, Y; Bamblett, M; Salamone, C; Jones, A; Kelaher M. 2021 Aug 12. Cultural determinants of health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - a narrative overview of reviews. Int J Equity Health. 20(1):181. doi: 10.1186/s12939-021-01514-2. PMID: 34384447; PMCID: PMC8359545.

2 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>.

3 Harlem Children's Zone. 2022. Impact Report 2021-22.

4 Rong, T; Ristevski, E; Carroll, M. 2023. Exploring community engagement in place-based approaches in areas of poor health and disadvantage: A scoping review, Health & Place, Volume 81, ISSN 1353-8292.

5 Moore, TG and Fry, R. 2011. Place-based approaches to child and family services: A literature review. Parkville, Victoria: Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health. DOI: 10.4225/50/5577CE906382B. http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/Place_based_services_literature_review.pd

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

MOORE ET AL (2024) STATE 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."*⁷

One of the things that makes the CG Approach different to other services is that it not only provides the core conditions for change for individual children, families and communities as outlined in the evidence, but it includes the necessary broader systems conditions to enable this change. This includes a focus on power and governance (bottom up), cultural centring and redressing structural racism and disempowerment. This means that how services are delivered and who delivers them are critical to the achievement of wellbeing and the chances of sustained, long-term outcomes.

INGKERRENYEKE ANYENTEKE-IRREME (CHILD, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TOGETHER)



7 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>.

Children's Ground aims to create a dynamic environment for change, driven and trusted by community, resetting relationships and decision-making between communities and services.

Children's Ground takes individual and systemic conditions and centres them through first culture, creating a long-term plan for change.

A key condition for change is that Children's Ground is led by local communities, for local communities. This empowers local leadership, with a key principle of inclusion, to ensure most children and families in a community have access to high-quality education, positive health and wellbeing and equity in opportunities into and through adulthood.

To enable local community leadership, Children's Ground has a dual governance model which differentiates it from most service systems. Organisational governance equally recognises both western corporate and First Nations governance standards and practice.

As an Aboriginal organisation, First Nations people comprise over 50% of the board of the corporation under western laws, responsible for broader organisational strategy, compliance and financial accountability.

However, this does not overreach the cultural authority of local First Nations people who are recognised through customary law in communities. Each community is authorised to govern and lead their communities under First Nations accountability and standards. Each community oversees their own CG Approach plan, with service systems design, daily operations, standards, practice and evaluation led by local First Nations authority. Both arms of governance operate in tandem to drive strategy, cultural safety and legal compliance of the organisation. Dual governance delivers local empowerment to local people over the decisions for their children, families and communities.

As a system of innovation, the CG Approach is designed to adapt and continuously learn. Like First Nations people and culture, this ability to adapt, learn, survive and thrive by embedding decisions in the context of community is critical if the CG Approach is to succeed in the long term.

The CG Approach is not a 'service' that delivers 'to' people. It is led by and is part of each community.

It is an approach that builds upon the social, cultural and economic wealth where children live, recognising local capability, vision, strength and history of resilience.

The CG Approach is deliberately designed to empower communities experiencing generational service system racism, exclusion and injustice. It focuses on access and prevention through a first cultural design, community-driven approach, growing local strengths, talents, access and equity.

The 25-year aim is for communities to have the freedom and independence to drive social, cultural, economic and political inclusion and wellbeing. It recognises that children, families and communities who need the most, deserve the best – that they are the experts in their own lives and that their voice and talent are critical to creating change.

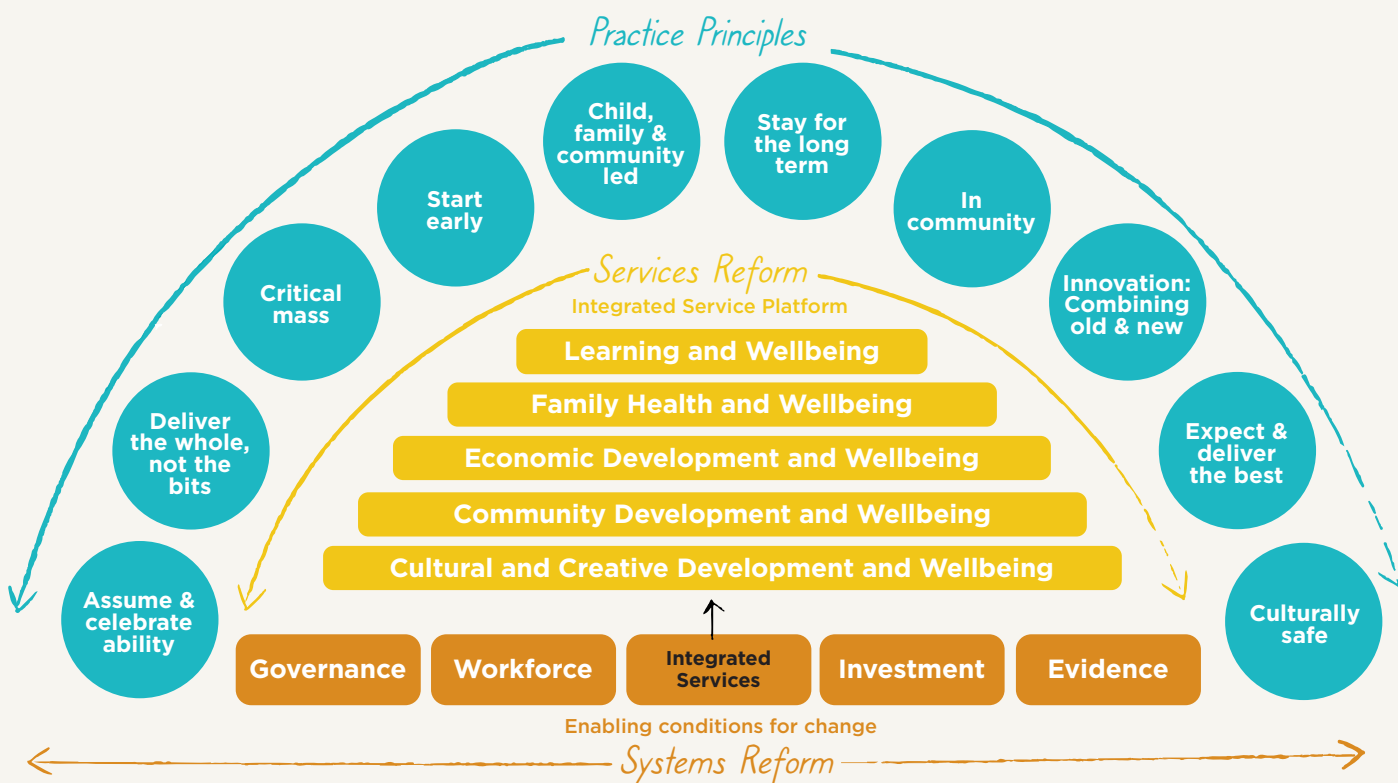




Figure 1 depicts the CG Approach, including the three core components that collectively enable systems reform at all levels required for sustained long-term change over a generation.

1. PRINCIPLES. 2. INTEGRATED SERVICES PLATFORM. 3. SYSTEMS — ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE.

FIGURE 1: THE CHILDREN'S GROUND APPROACH



As a whole system approach, Children's Ground identifies a range of conditions necessary for children and families, as well as how systems and services need to run to be effective. These include what is delivered, how it is delivered and the critical enabling conditions in wider service systems that act as enablers for change.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES in each community have access to all service areas of the CG Approach (yellow bars), with all services delivered in line with Children's Ground's ten principles (blue circles).

THE INTEGRATED SERVICE areas are 'what' Children's Ground delivers, and the principles are 'how' services and supports are delivered.

THE ENABLING CONDITIONS for change (orange blocks) are key systemic and authorising environments required to change the relationships between service delivery, participation, outcomes and decision-making. This includes governance (community led), funding (at scale for outcomes, not outputs) and workforce (local and permanent rather than external and transient).

There is a reinforcing overlap between the ten principles, five service areas and five conditions for change (e.g. deliver the whole not the bits, integrated service platform and integrated services all refer to the same holistic service model linking principles and practice).

The following pages provide practical detail about the three core components, including 'what' and 'how' services are delivered and the enabling systemic conditions for change.

FIGURE 2: CG APPROACH INTEGRATED SERVICE PLATFORM

25 year Learning, Wellbeing and Development					Integration and Delivery
	Stage 1 Early childhood 0-8 year olds	Stage 2 Childhood 6-11 year olds	Stage 3 Young people 12-16 year olds	Stage 4 Emerging adults 17-24 year olds	
Learning & Wellbeing 	• First Nations and western curriculum and pedagogy • Early childhood education and development • Integrating health and emotional literacy • Family engagement • On country and in centre	• First Nations and western curriculum and pedagogy with global skills and knowledge, creating engaged and successful learners	• First Nations, western and global skills and knowledge continued. • Transition to adulthood • Enterprise skills • Workforce ready	• Provide individual support and mentoring plans to assist transitions to work and further education	
	• Physical, emotional, social, cognitive, creative, academic, cultural, financial knowledge and skills • Individual learning and wellbeing plans • Out of hours education and extracurricular programs				
Family Health & Wellbeing 	• Health promotion – Promotion outreach and social determinants focus (integrated into programs as well as outreach) • Social and emotional wellbeing – Counselling, learning integration (addressing trauma and stress) • Child and maternal health – Support and education focused on maternal and child health, sexual health, nutrition, childhood emotional and cognitive development, parenting • Nutrition – Preparing and cooking breakfast, lunch and morning/afternoon tea for children • Environmental health – Supporting healthier and safer environments in which children live				
Community 	• Local Governance • Intergenerational community centre • Community Development – Community led design of activities strengthens and celebrates safety, family, culture and daily life and responds to community priorities/needs				
Culture 	• Culture, law, language and practice is promoted and revitalised in all CG activities with resources to strengthen and access cultural life				
Economy 	• Employment and training • Enterprise • Financial and consumer literacy				
Coordination 	• Internal and external service coordination – formal agreements, partner delivery, collective impact, facilitation of access to other services				



THE 'WHAT' – SERVICE ACCESS AND DELIVERY

The full CG Approach has five key service areas within each community – this is 'what' is delivered through the CG Approach integrated service platform – as shown in Figure 2:

1. Learning & Wellbeing includes early childhood through to post-secondary education, growing and adding delivery with children and young people over the 25-year period. This is delivered through a cultural- and western-based curriculum.
2. Family Health & Wellbeing includes a suite of physical and mental health promotion services and supports, working with individuals and whole families.
3. Economic Development & Wellbeing includes local employment and enterprise.

4. Community Development & Wellbeing includes local community governance and intergenerational centres in each community where services are delivered and coordinated. These are places of safety, celebration, connection and community and cultural life.

5. Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing focuses on centring and strengthening first cultural knowledge and language and creative arts.

Services are structured to be delivered during the day, on weekends and through school holidays. It is an extended-hours, whole of community life approach. Internal integration and collaboration with local services is a priority across all areas of this service platform.

This is a holistic system designed to respond to the multiple factors that are needed for children and families to flourish. By placing these services where people

live, integrating them and centring the child and family, the system can be responsive and prioritise the needs of individuals and community. Being governed by community, in location allows self-determination, quality and standards to be owned by the people.

The growth model meant that the key service areas were limited during the evaluation period with the biggest impact on primary aged learning, cultural health, extended hours, community development (infrastructure and fully place-based delivery) and economic development (enterprise, financial literacy and employment).

See Appendix 2 for detailed activity, service delivery and systems reform that occurred in Central Australia throughout this evaluation period.



THE 'HOW' – PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The CG Approach allows each community to design, deliver and govern according to the varying needs and contexts of their community.

The CG Approach starts from a different assumption from those of current mainstream western service systems. Rather than an external service or program being delivered to people, the CG Approach starts from the community, building relationships, empowerment and places of safety.

These are the necessary foundations from which participation, voice and agency grow over time.

The ten principles below encourage and compel all staff to work together in ways that create safety, empowerment and trust with community, prioritising relationship-building and responsiveness to varying needs, voices and contexts. This makes it possible to deliver services which are led and delivered by local people, based on strong relationships and shared understanding. Children and families are participating in services and environments where they feel comfortable and with people they know.

In turn, this supports engagement, effectiveness and empowerment.

Furthermore, engagement with any part of Children's Ground begins with a recognition of strengths. People don't come to Children's Ground because they have a problem. They come for their children to engage in early learning, for adults to work and so they can connect with other families. Members of each community do engage with Children's Ground for support with challenges and issues that they are experiencing, however, this takes place in the context of trust, strong relationships and positive long-term focus.

Child, family & community led

- Governance and leadership by First Nations people living in communities.
- Leading design, delivery, evaluation.

Start early

- Begin in the early (pre birth to eight years).
- Maternal and infant health and wellbeing; Early childhood learning and wellbeing.
- Prevention and early intervention focus.

A critical mass (work with everyone)

- Know and include all children, families and community members.
- Engage enough children and families for a critical mass (75%) to enable wide-spread, community level shift from inequity to opportunity.

Deliver the whole, not the bits

- Deliver the full Children's Ground Approach and integrated service platform as a holistic wrap around system of services and support including: Learning & Wellbeing, Family Health & Wellbeing, Economic Development & Wellbeing, Community Development & Wellbeing and Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing.

Innovation – combining old and new

- Combining First Nations knowledge systems and values as most developed knowledge in the world, with leading global knowledge, practice.

Culturally safe

- First Nations people design and deliver a system that privileges 65,000 years of knowledge and practice.
- Enable children, young people, adults and Elders feel safe, respected, valued and nurtured in their culture and identity.

In community (place-based)

- Place-based and intergenerational approach delivering where children and families live.
- Intergenerational community centres in each community as a local hub for governance, learning, health, economic development and celebrations.
- Building upon safety, inclusion, social, cultural and economic strength of the whole community.

Expect and deliver the best

- Recruit and train a high quality workforce.
- Provide the best resources and services to deliver at a high quality.
- Evaluate everything (process and impact), with First Nations people leading.
- Expect/encourage the best of all people.
- Work in a way that achieves equity in delivery and meets key human rights and principles.

Assume and celebrate ability

- Recognise the ability of children, families and community and build upon this strength.
- Recognise First Cultural knowledge and expertise.
- Be flexible and responsive to each child and family and community and create environments where people succeed and their talent can shine.

Stay for the long-term

- Work with children (and their families) pre-birth to 25 years through all major risk transition periods.
- Build whole of community change across a generation.
- Long-term economic, social and cultural wellbeing.

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE – SYSTEMS REFORM

Children's Ground grew out of decades of work with and by First Nations people, leading to an understanding of the key drivers that prevent and enable change. How the CG Approach addresses these drivers and creates the conditions for change is shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: CHILDREN'S GROUND SYSTEMS REFORM

	Current System	Children's Ground
1. Governance	Top down	Bottom up Bottom up, community-led design, governance, delivery and evaluation of an integrated service system.
2. Service Delivery	Crisis response and delivered in silos	Preventative and integrated A holistic integrated preventative service system that is culturally responsive.
3. Workforce	Short-term: outsiders	Local and long-term Building towards a local First Nations workforce.
4. Investment	Short-term, project based	Long-term, collective, at scale Collective investment at scale – combined philanthropic and government funding to provide enough funding for each community to achieve excellence in services and resources, enabling flexibility, responsiveness, innovation and local control.
5. Evidence	Outputs based (what and how many)	Outcomes based (impact) First Nations led Evaluating and evidencing the CG Approach to achieve systems reform through evidence and leading practice, embedding First Nations data, research and evaluation sovereignty.



The combination of Children's Ground's ten practice principles (the 'how'), integrated service platform (the 'what') and employment and governance structures (systems reform and enabling conditions for change) allows service delivery and support to be tailored, comprehensive and holistic, addressing multiple complex health, wellbeing and life challenges.

Collectively, all elements of the CG Approach work together to empower First Nations people to achieve access, equity, resilience and wellbeing across their life span and between generations.

The analysis in this evaluation will consider the impact of the CG Approach within the context of a 25-year systems reform strategy.

It will evaluate whether the progress and key building blocks for long term change for children and families and reform of the system are being achieved. It will evaluate the interconnectedness between the three components of the CG Approach (system, service, practice) within the context of a growth model in Central Australia.



SECTION 2: ABOUT THIS EVALUATION

This second evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe covers the three-year period from 2020 to 2022.

It follows the first evaluation, which covered 2017 to 2019. It presents outcomes for the same four communities in Central Australia: Irrkerlantye (Whitegate Town Camp); Mpweringke Anapipe (consisting of homelands north

of Alice Springs); Yarrenyty Arltene (Larapinta Valley Town Camp) and Uyenpere Atwatye (Hidden Valley Town Camp). It also includes families from Amengkwerne (near Alice Springs), where early community engagement began during this evaluation period.

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation has ethics approval from the Northern Territory Human Ethics Research Committee, facilitated by

Northern Territory Health and Menzies School of Health Research. The evaluation method, data analysis and report have been overseen by Children's Ground's national Research Advisory Group, consisting of experts in academic, community and systems research and evaluation. See the Research Advisory Group's endorsement of this evaluation report in Appendix 8.



2.1: EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS

The evaluation outcomes framework is presented through both western and First Nations lenses.

WESTERN OUTCOMES EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Children's Ground's 25-year longitudinal evaluation framework has ten long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community, outlined in Figure 4¹⁹. Progress indicators are attached to each outcome to measure change and impact over 25 years of the CG Approach (see Appendix 3).

FIGURE 4: CHILDREN'S GROUND OUTCOMES EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

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

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.

The expectation of the CG Approach is that the outcomes for children will occur throughout the 25-year period, building over time. Family and community outcomes will be achieved as the younger generation of children themselves become parents and adults of working age.

¹⁹ Note: 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'.

ARRERNTÉ OUTCOMES EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

In 2011, Arrernte leaders articulated the CG Approach and outcomes in the following painting. Since starting Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance) has used this painting to frame the analysis of outcomes of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.²⁰

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

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

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

²⁰ Painting design by Jane Davis, painted by Amunda Gorey. 2011. Painting interpretation by Jane Davis and Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance).



**DESCRIPTION WRITTEN BY THE INGKERREKELE ARNTARANTE-AREME
(FIRST NATIONS GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE)**



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



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



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

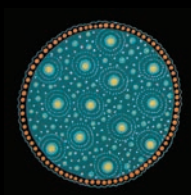


FOUR BLUE HALF CIRCLES WITH PEOPLE: These are kids, families and Elders in each area – all the Children's Ground communities. They are within their own traditional lands and communities – but are all together too. We connect within our communities and with other communities. This is bringing everyone together. Everyone watching over the children. Everyone leading Children's Ground for our children.



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

- The footprints are us always looking back and following the Ancestors in our teaching and learning. The footprints always return to our country.
- We are creating the footprints with the children so they can build the life they want. Wherever they live, they might have their own children and begin the cycle again. This will stop them from living the hardship we have now.
- Footprints mean we don't stay in one small place and Children's Ground is not in one place. It is in the community, the home and out bush – it is anywhere learning can happen, where the child's learning, health and life can be strengthened. These places will be safe for everyone. When our children are taken to places where they can learn in their way, then they can focus.



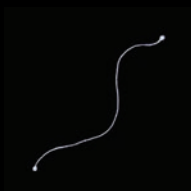
FOUR OUTER CIRCLES: These are children when they become adults – graduated students from Children's Ground with a good future. They will have a choice. They have had all those experiences and the knowledge they have gathered through Children's Ground. This will mean they have real choices. They will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



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



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



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



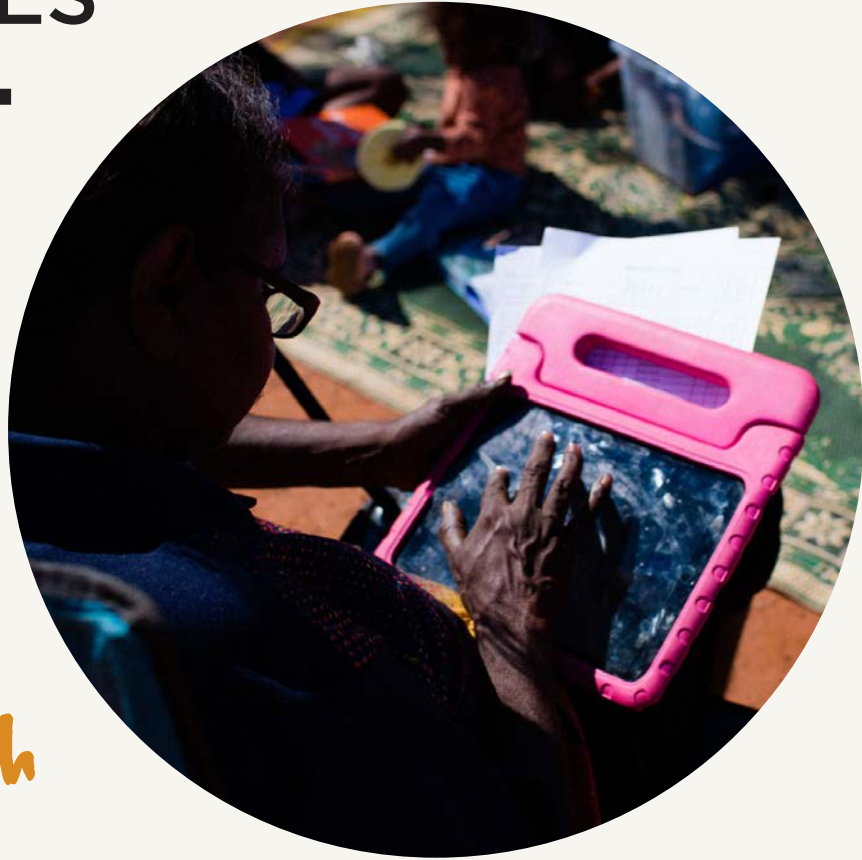
BLUE AND WHITE DOTS AND YELLOW CURVES: These are the knowledge – the teaching and learning travelling around (in homes/communities and Children's Ground). Within Children's Ground we have two ways of learning – led by us. Children are learning First Nations language and culture and western language and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

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

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

2.2: EVALUATION SOVEREIGNTY AND PRINCIPLES

“Aboriginal people have been researched to death. It’s time we research ourselves back to life.”



**WILLIAM TILMOUTH, ARRERNTE ELDER,
CHILDREN’S GROUND CO-FOUNDER AND
CHAIR OF BOARD**

Evaluations undertaken by non-First Nations people in relation to First Nations people and communities have a significant risk of cultural bias, are reductive and can contribute to ongoing harm and colonisation.^{21 22 23 24 25}

21 Luke, J; Verbunt, E; Zhang, A; et al. 2022. Questioning the ethics of evidence-based practice for Indigenous health and social settings in Australia. *BMJ Global Health*;7:e009167. doi:10.1136/ bmjgh-2022-009167.

22 Drawson, AS; Toombs, E; Mushquash, CJ. 2017. Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2). DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.5.

23 Larkin, S. 2006 Evidence-Based policy making in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. *Aust Aborig Stud*.2:17–26.

24 Saini, A. 2020. Want to do better science? admit you’re not objective. *Nature*.579:175.

25 Drawson, AS; Toombs, E; Mushquash, CJ. 2017. Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2). DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.5.

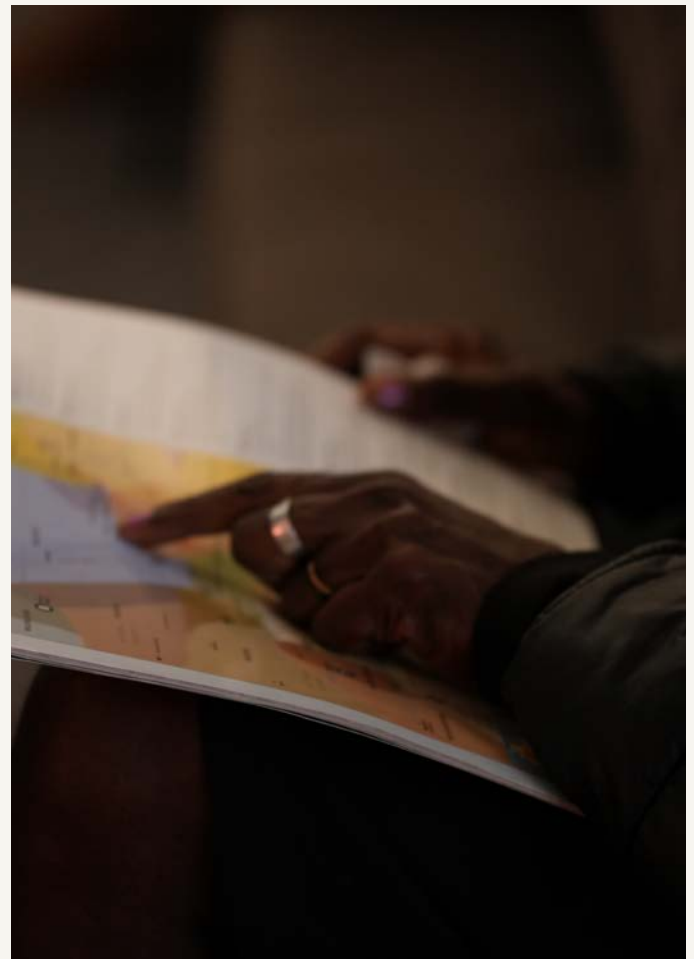
Internationally and within Australia, there has been significant movement in First Nations research, data and evaluation sovereignty and rights and self-determination to reduce the divide between researchers and the researched.^{26 27 28 29 30}

Cultural safety in evaluation and data and evaluation sovereignty are a priority. Evaluation integrity, depth and cultural safety are best achieved by First Nations researchers from within the linguistic and cultural context of the communities wherein research and evaluation are being undertaken. This is also central to First Nations self-determination through sovereignty in research and evaluation undertaken about them – consistent with the United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.³¹

To reduce risks of cultural bias, Children’s Ground’s standards and systems reform in ‘evidence and evaluation’ ensures local First Nations people are leading and contributing to the evaluation of their solutions with their communities.

Children’s Ground evaluations are undertaken internally by the Research & Evaluation team, consisting of First Nations and non-First Nations evaluators, alongside the First Nations Governance Committees in each region. Evaluation methods are designed and undertaken with and by First Nations people. This is in line with leading practice.^{32 33 34} Cultural knowledge translation is undertaken by First Nations evaluators and translators.

In Central Australia, Children’s Ground’s Research & Evaluation team is located in Alice Springs as part of the regional team. This evaluation was undertaken in line with key research and evaluation principles developed with First Nations leaders.



- 26 Garba, I; Sterling, R; Plevel, R; Carson, W; Cordova-Marks, FM; Cummins, J; Curley, C; David-Chavez, D; Fernandez, A; Hiraldo, D; Hiratsuka, V; Hudson, M; Jäger, MB; Jennings, LL; Martinez, A; Yracheta, J; Garrison, NA; Carroll, SR. 2023. Indigenous Peoples and research: self-determination in research governance. *Front Res Metr Anal.* 15;8:1272318. doi: 10.3389/fрма.2023.1272318. PMID: 38033627; PMCID: PMC10685893.
- 27 Research & Knowledge Translation - Lowitja Institute. <https://www.lowitja.org.au/research/our-approach-to-knowledge-translation>.
- 28 Hayward, A; Sjoblom, E; Sinclair, S; Cidro, J. 2021. A New Era of Indigenous Research: Community-based Indigenous Research Ethics Protocols in Canada. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics.* 16(4) pp403-417 doi: [10.1177/15562646211023705](https://doi.org/10.1177/15562646211023705). Publisher (Open Access): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/15562646211023705>.
- 29 Kennedy Wiradjuri, M; Ninomiya, MM; Ninomiya, MM; Brascoupé Anishinabeg/Haudenauasnee, S; Smylie Metis, J; Calma Kungarakana Iwaidja, T; Mohamed Narrunga Kurna, J; Stewart Taungurung, PJ; Maddox Bagumani Modewa, R. 2024. Knowledge translation in Indigenous health research: voices from the field. *Med J Aust.* 2024 Jul 1;221(1):61-67. doi: 10.5694/mja2.52357. PMID: 38946651.
- 30 Flas Borda, O; Rahman, MA. 1991. *Action and Knowledge*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland.
- 31 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- 32 Larkin, S. 2006. Evidence-Based policy making in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. *Aust Aborig Stud*;2:17–26.
- 33 Luke, J; Verbunt, E; Zhang A; et al. 2022. Questioning the ethics of evidence-based practice for Indigenous health and social settings in Australia. *BMJ Global Health*;7:e009167. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009167.
- 34 Wehipeihana, N; McKegg, K. 2018. Values and culture in Evaluative thinking: insights from Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Dir Eval.* 93–107.

Children's Ground's research and evaluation principles:

FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE OWN AND CONTROL DATA AND EVALUATION about them and on their country, guided by customary rights and responsibilities.

TRUST AND RESPECT FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE FROM AND LIVING ON LAND where evaluation is undertaken.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION FROM BEGINNING TO END, from designing, planning and undertaking data collection to analysis, reporting, knowledge communication and translation.

LOCAL CONTEXT AND KNOWLEDGE MUST BE PRIVILEGED.

CREATING KNOWLEDGE TOGETHER through combined First Nations and western practice.

KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION AND IMPACT, ensuring what we learn is used to improve lives.

Only undertake evaluation that **BENEFITS PARTICIPANTS AND COMMUNITIES/GROUPS.**

RIGOUR AND QUALITY: ensure evaluation meets accountability and standards endorsed by western and First Nations expert Advisory Groups.

Working in line with these principles enables First Nations researchers/leaders and western-trained researchers to work together to minimise the risk of cultural bias and to continue exploring and strengthening local First Nations cultural approaches to research and evaluation.

2.3: METHOD

This evaluation was undertaken within a Participatory Action Research approach that respects, privileges and builds from the knowledge and experience of local First Nations people, providing agency over evaluation processes. It is a collaborative approach described further in this section under the heading 'Arrente leadership in evaluation'.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach including a range of data collection tools to collect and collate both quantitative and qualitative data. Most qualitative evaluation data was collected in 2023, with some collected data finalised in early 2024.

The following outlines what and how data was collected for this evaluation, and with whom.





INTERNAL ADMINISTRATIVE DATA		
Children’s Ground’s internal administrative data system collected participation and activity data from 2020 to 2022. Data represents 1,415 First Nations participants and First Nations local staff who engaged with Children’s Ground ³⁵ and includes people who were frequent or infrequent visitors within Children’s Ground communities.		
INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS		
A purposive sampling method was used to ensure data was collected from a sample of people from each Children’s Ground community, staff teams and local services.		
Structured and semi-structured face-to-face evaluation interviews and focus groups, qualitative and quantitative data were collected with:		
28 First Nations staff and family members.	13 western-trained non-First Nations staff.	Six local service providers.
<i>Response rate</i> = 100%. No one declined an interview.		<i>Response rate</i> = 35%. 17 services were invited to participate: 6 people interviewed; 3 people had left their position; 6 did not respond to emails/calls; 1 did not have time; 1 declined. Service provider types included: education, health, arts, language, government and support organisations.
First Nations family and community voices (quotes) are presented extensively throughout this report as evidence. This is part of Children’s Ground’s commitment to ensuring that First Nations voices and perspectives are privileged and accurately represented.		
Quotes labelled anonymously as ‘[age range], [gender], First Nations family/staff member’ came from evaluation interviews. The quotes presented throughout represent the voices of 27 of 28 First Nations staff and family members interviewed.		
Quotes labelled anonymously as ‘local service provider’ came from evaluation interviews. The quotes presented throughout represent the voices of all six local services interviewed.		
Quotes with names attributed did not come from evaluation interviews or data collection – these came from staff, families or other stakeholders in other Children’s Ground contexts and publications.		
CHILD LEARNING & WELLBEING TOOL		
Cultural and western-trained educators collected quantitative learning and wellbeing progress data with 45 children aged 3-7 years.		

35 This data includes children and families who previously (before 2021) engaged with Children’s Ground in one of the original four communities and from 2021 to 2022 engaged with a fifth community (Amengkwerne) which began Children’s Ground’s Community Engagement and Planning process, as the prelude to establishing the CG Approach. Further details about this are presented further on in the report.

ANONYMOUS SURVEYS

Via an anonymous online survey, quantitative and qualitative data was collected with:

Note: Some First Nations staff not active on email were approached and invited to complete a hard copy in person.

35 Children's Ground staff who worked during the evaluation period, including 18 First Nations staff and 17 non-First Nations staff.

Survey was sent to staff who worked in the period, this included 21 non-First Nations staff (current and previous), and 23 actively engaged First Nations staff.

First Nations response rate = 78%

Non-First Nations response rate = 81%

Seven local service providers.

Survey sent to 17 services.
= 41% response rate.

FAMILY/COMMUNITY BASELINE SURVEY INTERVIEWS

Children's Ground's 25-year baseline evaluation 'Story of Change' structured survey interviews collected quantitative data with:

202 First Nations family/community members.

The age range included: 36 people aged 18-24 years; 146 aged 25-59 years; 16 aged 60+ years and 4 adults of unknown age.

Data was collected from 2020 to 2022. In 2020, 53 surveys were completed. Across 2021 to 2022, an additional 150 surveys were completed.

Data collected from 2020 to 2022 is included in this report as descriptive statistics establishing the 'baseline' for family and community lived experiences (see section 'Regional and Community data snapshot').

Relevant data from Interplay's Structural Equation Modelling of the baseline data is also presented in section 'Change and impact for Community', demonstrating the cumulative nature of life stressors.

The 'Story of Change' survey was developed with The Interplay Project. See Appendix 4 for more information about Interplay and its survey development and data analysis partnership.

INTERNAL TARGETED SURVEYS

86 First Nations staff completed a 'Previous Employment' survey, from 2017 to 2022 = 92% response rate.

28 First Nations staff/family members participated in a one-off nutrition survey/interview that collected quantitative and qualitative data about Children's Ground's nutrition delivery and impact. Purposive sample - only 28 people were invited to complete.

See Appendix 5 for data notes in relation to: Data by key age groups; Evaluation questionnaire denominators; Small data sets; Challenges with sourcing consistent publicly available data; etc.

2.4: ARRERNTTE LEADERSHIP IN EVALUATION



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. For the western world, we can supply the data, we can produce the evidence and we can convince governments and whoever wants to listen that this is the way to do things, this is the way to work with Aboriginal people and in Aboriginal society. I've always said that we [First Nations people] are the world's greatest observers.



If we see change happening and change for the better, we observe that. It's not self-interest, it's community interest and at the end of the day, it's your survival. It is part of the observation because you're actually a part of it and you can see the change. Your brother has got a job now, he's not drinking, he's not talking about suicide, and he's got purpose in life and his family gets to eat. People won't necessarily tell white fella researchers this personal stuff, but they will tell family [as the researchers].

Research gives us the foundation so we can mirror off our achievements. We can show the world our strengths. Their statistics aren't as good as ours and never probably will be. For us, it's a tool of empowerment. We don't need white fellas researching us, we need to research ourselves so that we understand what this research will tell us. It's that foundation that we build with ancient knowledge and research knowledge and technology today, you can build a very strong platform."

WILLIAM TILMOUTH, ARRERNTTE ELDER, CHILDREN'S GROUND CO-FOUNDER AND CHAIR OF BOARD, 2020

First Nations leaders and staff have been involved in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) from the outset. Leadership occurs in partnership with Children's Ground's Research and Evaluation Director (non-First Nations), and Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Community Governance) and First Nations research and evaluation staff. This includes the ongoing design of data collection tools, data collection, data reviews, data analysis and reporting for this evaluation.

Under the guidance and oversight of First Nations governance, western evaluation staff were involved in all aspects of the evaluation including supporting coordination of the evaluation process. This report was drafted by western evaluation staff and reviewed and approved by the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme.

As per the first evaluation report (2017 to 2019), this report includes First Nations evaluation data analysis and First Nations only analysis sections that sit alongside the analysis undertaken from a western perspective. This was a decision made by The Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme for the first evaluation report.

First Nations data analysis was undertaken over two sessions with 20 First Nations staff and leaders from the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme.

The First Nations analysis was undertaken using the First Nations Evaluation Framework (pictured on page 39), developed in the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019).

The analysis sessions included:

RESEARCH & EVALUATION PRINCIPLES: Reviewing and articulating Children's Ground's research principles in the context of the evaluation process and data.

MAPPING INFLUENCES AND OCCURRENCES: Mapping key occurrences over the evaluation period (2020 to 2022), including events, highlights, challenges, community-specific circumstances and sorry business.

ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA: Review, discussion and interpretation of de-identified qualitative data from evaluation interviews with First Nations families and staff. For each qualitative statement/response, they discussed 'What the person was saying about Children's Ground', and if they were saying 'it is working well or not'.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS: Two First Nations research and evaluation staff undertook a final process and impact analysis sessions, grouping the analysis into key themes that connected to Central Australia's First Nations Evaluation Framework.

FINAL ANALYSIS AND CONFIRMATION: The final draft report was reviewed by First Nations researchers and the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme, including checking of data, analysis and key findings. In this session they also dictated their foreword and approved the report for release.

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

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

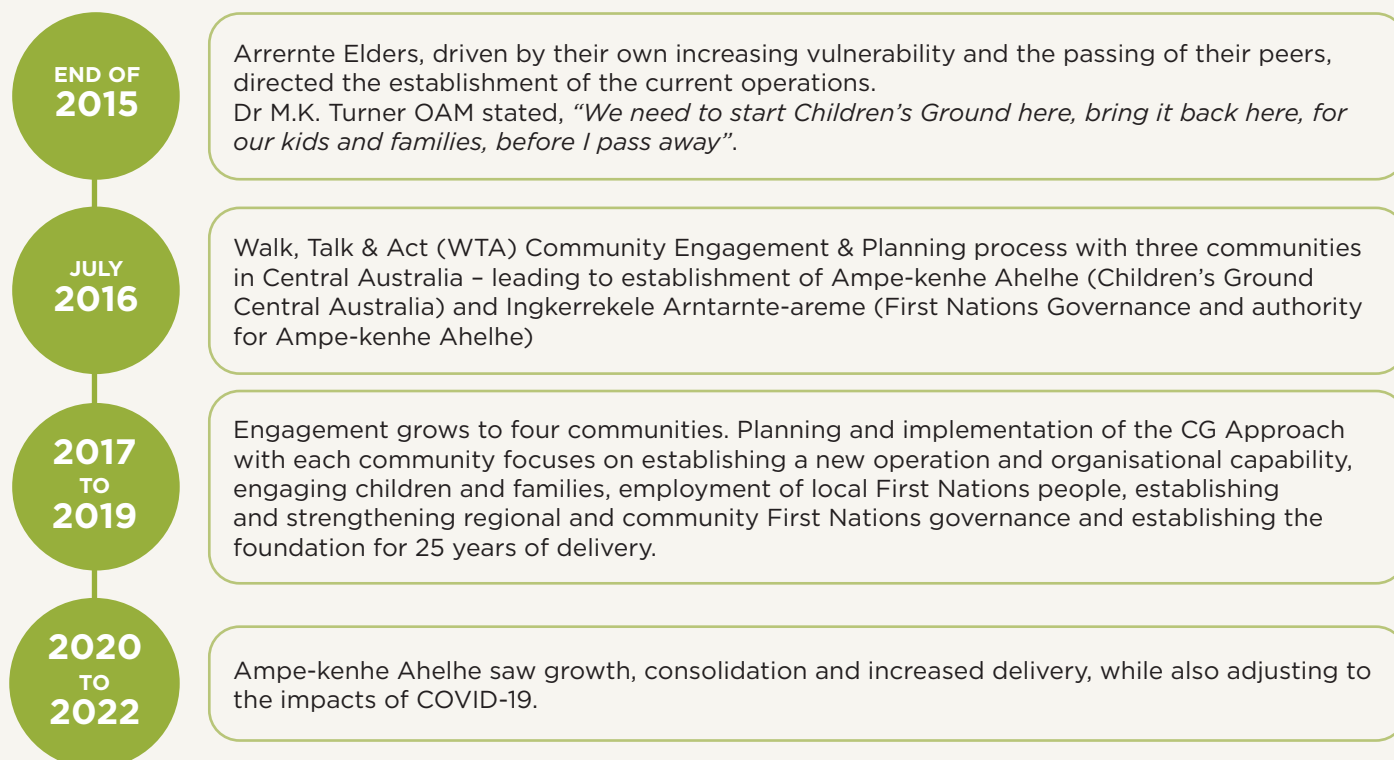
SECTION 3: AMPE-KENHE AHELHE (CHILDREN'S GROUND CENTRAL AUSTRALIA)

The CG Approach arose from decades of work and leadership by First Nations people in Central Australia. The first efforts to operationalise the CG Approach occurred in Alice Springs in 2011/2012, with leadership from the town camps of Uyenpere Atwatye and Yarrenyty Arltere and Arrernte Elders and community leaders. A lack of funding and Government commitment put a halt to implementation.



Figure 5 shows a brief timeline of establishing and growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe from 2015 to 2022.

FIGURE 5: ESTABLISHING AND PROGRESSING AMPE-KENHE AHELHE



This section outlines the evolution of the CG Approach in the Central Australia region.



3.1: COMMUNITIES LEADING CHILDREN'S GROUND IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

In 2016, Arrernte Elders in Central Australia identified four communities to establish the CG Approach. The communities were identified through cultural authority, relationship, need and initial community engagement and planning that occurred in 2011/2012.

The four communities in and around Mparntwe are:

IRRKERLANTYE (WHITEGATE TOWN CAMP) – home to some of the recognised Traditional Owners of Mparntwe (Alice Springs) through both customary and Native Title law.

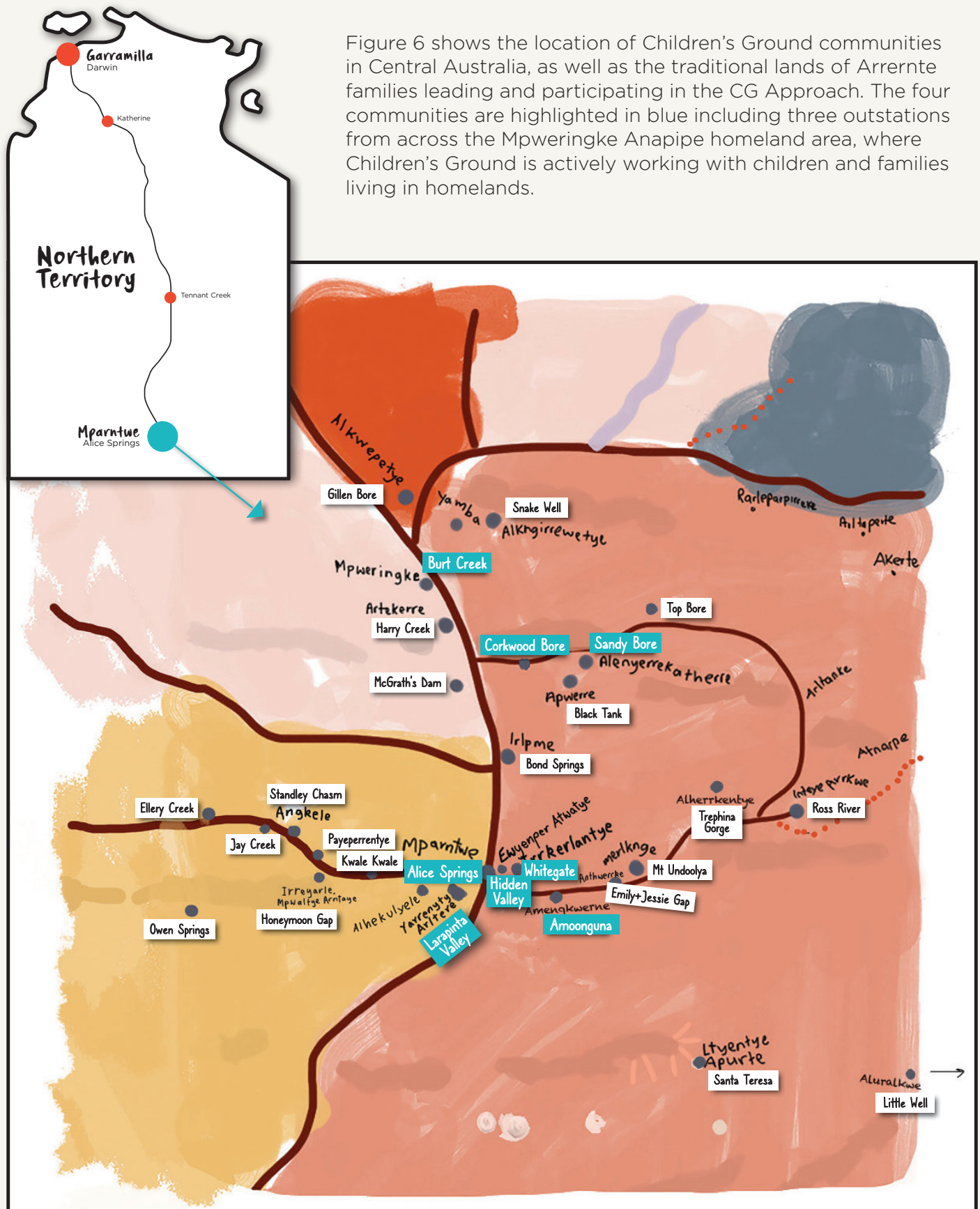
MPWERINGKE ANAPIPE – the traditional lands of some of the Elders and their children. The region includes a group of outstations/homelands north of Alice Springs: Burt Creek, Corkwood Bore, Sandy Bore, Gillen Bore, 16 Mile, Black Tank, Snake Well, Harry's Creek and McGrath's Dam. Since starting Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, Children's Ground has worked with three key homelands through the guidance of Elders. Burt Creek was the primary location. Sandy Bore and to a lesser extent, Corkwood Bore were also homelands where delivery occurred during this evaluation period. Engagement occurred on occasions with children and families from the other outstations and at other homelands across the Mpweringke Anapipe region. It also included engagement of families connected to this country and living in public housing in Alice Springs.

YARRENTY ARLTERE (LARAPINTA VALLEY TOWN CAMP) – a site of initial community planning and design in 2011/2012.

UYENPERE ATWATYE (HIDDEN VALLEY TOWN CAMP) – site of initial community planning and design in 2011/2012.



FIGURE 6: CHILDREN'S GROUND CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES



All four communities are part of the greater Arrernte Nation: three locations are in Central/Eastern Arrernte and one location is largely Western Arrarnta.

Each community is its own site with its own geographic boundary, population, community/cultural governance and its unique demographics and contexts. There are kinship relationships between all communities. At times, there is cross-community engagement in Children's Ground through shared traditional lands and kinship.

All four communities come together to provide overarching cultural governance to Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe through the Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme.

In early 2020, a fifth community, Amengkwerne, requested that Children's Ground begin early

years Learning & Wellbeing with their community. The strong cultural and family relationships with the existing four Children's Ground communities made this a natural development for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe.

In February 2020, COVID-19 emerged and it was not possible to begin engagement with Amengkwerne, as communities observed lockdowns.

A community request for engagement and delivery initiates our Walk, Talk & Act Community Engagement and Planning (see Figure 7) phase with a community. This is a comprehensive process. Due to COVID-19 and resource limitations, this full process did not occur at Amengkwerne. In discussions with local community

leaders and families it was agreed that a small 'action' phase would occur while growing resources towards a Community Engagement and Planning process for the full CG Approach.

In 2021, Children's Ground, with Amengkwerne community leaders established a small-scale early years operation. However, Amengkwerne was not established as an official 'CG Approach' site.

From the beginning of Children's Ground, children and families living in Amengkwerne have been engaging with early learning with the original four Children's Ground communities. As a result, Amengkwerne has been included in the data presented throughout this report.

FIGURE 7: CHILDREN'S GROUND'S WALK & TALK

Following a community request for Children's Ground to work with a community, the Children's Ground Walk, Talk & Act (WTA) Community Engagement and Planning process is put into action. It can last for anywhere between 6-24 months depending on the community context, circumstances and resources.

The WTA includes:

 INFORMED DECISION MAKING	 LED BY LOCAL PEOPLE	 FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ORIENTED	 ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT	 INCLUSIVE
Sharing the CG Approach with communities and undertaking collaborative planning, enabling families to make fully informed decisions that align with their aspirations, needs and goals.	Work with leaders from each community, or known to each community, to undertake WTA, engaging families in people's first language where possible.	Employ local community-based staff to lead WTA. Providing spaces and environments for community and family level discussions where people feel comfortable.	Hold large and small gatherings, such as early learning and community events as a point of engagement, depending on community planning and direction.	Aim to engage with every household in the community.

The WTA phase informs both the community and the organisation on viability and key conditions needed to progress. Subject to strong local governance and resources, a formal invitation from Community and Cultural leaders and Elders and Children's Ground's Board approval, the CG Approach formally begins.

3.2: GROWING AMPE-KENHE AHELHE IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

The CG Approach in Central Australia is in development. Over the period of evaluation, operations grew in all key areas of the CG Approach, in line with income growth.

This growth supported the strategic operational development towards the full CG Approach as well as organisational systems and capability.

Service and activity delivery that occurred across the CG Approach from 2020 to 2022 is outlined in Appendix 2 and is outlined further throughout this report. Therefore, it will not be presented in this section.

PROGRESS ACROSS THE 25-YEAR JOURNEY

The focus during the second three-year delivery and evaluation period was to build and consolidate equitable access and engagement as the foundation for 25 years of delivery. Progress milestones and expectations were adjusted to recognise and reflect operations and evolution of the 'growth model.' Figure 8 shows the CG Approach 25-year delivery and progress phases.

This evaluation period of 2020 to 2022 covers years 4 to 6 of CG Approach implementation.



FIGURE 8: CG APPROACH 25-YEAR DELIVERY AND PROGRESS PHASES

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.



Throughout this evaluation period, the CG Approach in Central Australia developed to sit across phases 'Access & Engagement: Establishing the CGA' and starting to move into 'Opportunity: A new norm emerging'. While 'a new norm emerging' is yet to be achieved for a majority of children and families, this evaluation demonstrates that this is being achieved for some. Through progress measures and key milestones, this evaluation will demonstrate and evidence the extent to which this has been achieved with children and families in Central Australia from 2017 to 2022.

Establishing equitable access and engagement has and will remain an ongoing priority

until resources for the full CG Approach are in place, at which point the full extent of a 'new normal' and consolidation of access, engagement and opportunity can be achieved.

GROWTH IN DELIVERY OF THE CG APPROACH

A gradual increase in funding and subsequently key delivery areas led to an increased extent to which the full CG Approach was implemented in Central Australia from 2020 to 2022.

Appendix 6 provides a detailed timeline of growth in operational delivery in Central Australia from 2020 to 2022, compared with the delivery of the full CG Approach. It includes 2019 as a growth comparison.

Delivery growth is also tracked and monitored in terms of the percentage of delivery across the CG Approach. Figure 9 outlines the percentage increase of delivery within each service areas of the CG Approach.

This assesses the extent to which implementation grew towards the full CG Approach from 2020 to 2022. It is assessed against the EFT (equivalent full time) positions required for implementation of the full model CG Approach in each service platform area, as well as the delivery based on recruitment and implementation. The 2019 delivery percentage has been included to build on the first Central Australian evaluation report.

FIGURE 9: OPERATIONAL GROWTH BY CG APPROACH PLATFORM AREA, BY YEAR

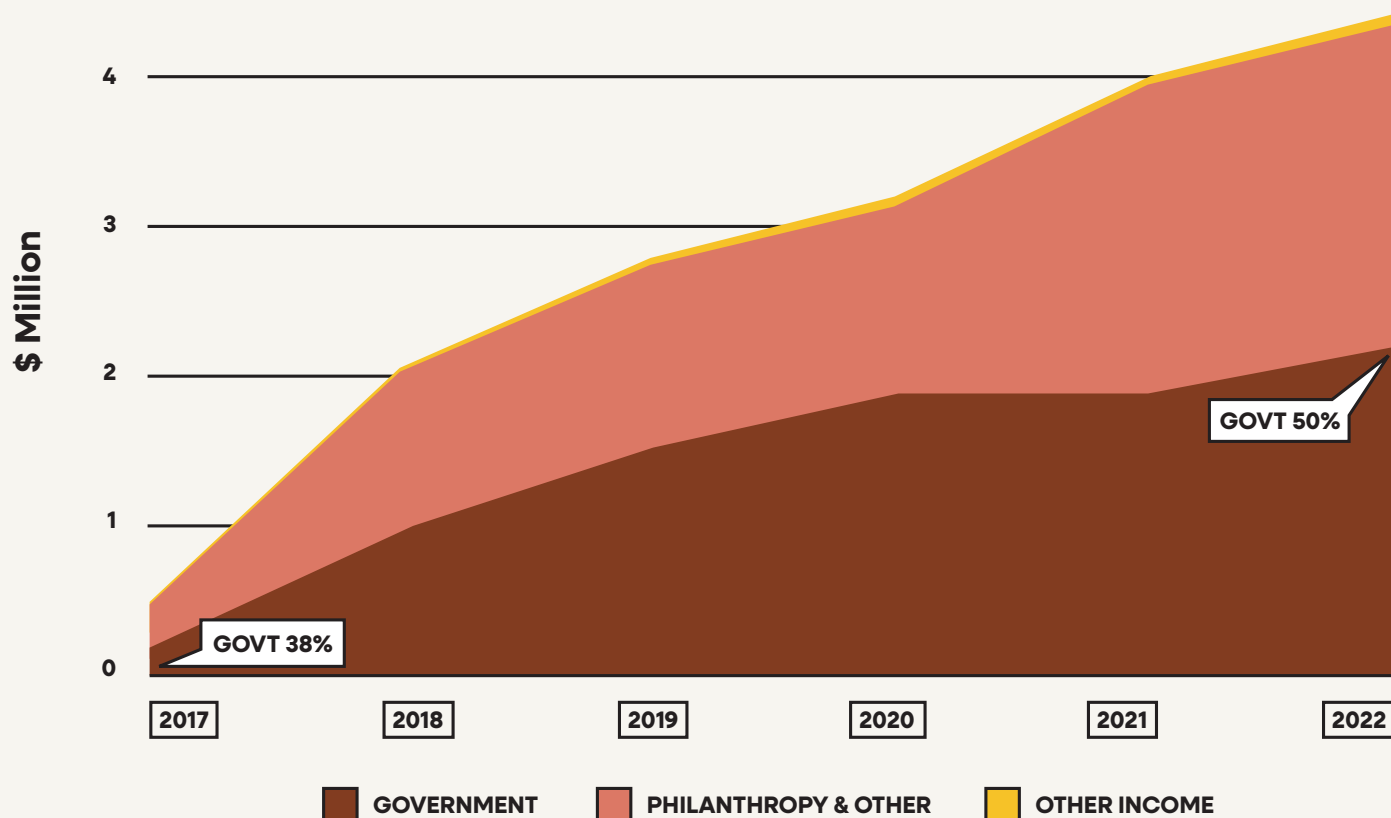
TRACKING AGAINST FULL CG APPROACH	<25%	25-50%	50-70%	75-100%
	2019	2020	2021	2022
Learning & Wellbeing				
Family Health & Wellbeing				
Economic Development & Wellbeing				
Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing				
Community Development & Wellbeing				

Note: This is what Children's Ground was resourced to deliver – not what was delivered.

Growth in delivery was directly aligned with growth in annual operational funding, achieved through Children's Ground's collective investment approach. Over the three years, funding grew by 58% through a combination of Australian Government and philanthropic grants and general donations.

Graph 1 shows the funding increase across each of the three years of this evaluation period, including 2017 to 2019, to present the full period of CG Approach delivery and growth.

GRAPH 1: ANNUAL FUNDING GROWTH YEAR-ON-YEAR, BY FUNDING SOURCE, FOR 2017 TO 2022



In this evaluation period, three government grants were secured during the period for: workforce development; preservation of languages and culture; and early learning in one targeted community that previously did not have funding. These grants supported and complemented existing government grants in early learning, family health and language protection and preservation.

During the period, philanthropic funding and donations also increased significantly. Over the period the ratio of government to non-government funding was close to 50:50.

One of the key developments was securing \$1.4M in philanthropic funding to purchase Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe's 'home' in Alice Springs. This was a significant development during the period. It provided the community and staff permanency and security. It provided the infrastructure for staff, organisational needs and growth. This in turn impacted positively on operational delivery and capacity in a growing organisation. For the Arrernte Elders and leaders of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, including traditional owners of the land, it legally secured ownership and place on their country for

the benefit of their families and communities – a reality which was forcibly removed at the point of colonisation.

The CG Approach operational funding growth is tracked at least quarterly and delivery growth and percentage is tracked annually to monitor the ongoing progress and context of growth in resources and delivery. Together, these inform the context for progress against the short, medium and long-term outcomes and what can be achieved within the resources available.

COVID-19 IMPACT

Throughout this evaluation period, each delivery area was impacted by limited resources and COVID-19. COVID-19 also provided an opportunity for community designed and led responses to health promotion, information and protecting families. Figure 10 outlines how COVID-19 impacted Children's Ground as it unfolded across the Northern Territory over the 3-year evaluation period.



FIGURE 10: COVID-19 IMPACT ON CG APPROACH DELIVERY AND ENGAGEMENT

2020

- The height of COVID fear and extensive online misinformation, but minimal community transmission in the NT at this stage.
- Biosecurity laws established – Children's Ground developed organisational and local COVID policies with First Nations leaders.
- All Children's Ground staff pivoted to provide COVID related health planning, promotion and support.
- Children's Ground developed and implemented a COVID Response Plan which included comprehensive family plans created with each family, Elders support, health information and education in first language, food security, hygiene, economic security and learning access.
- Family support for families relocating to and re-establishing homelands.
- Children's Ground worked closely with other local services in collaborative community wide coordinated responses and information.
- Development and distribution of COVID related information in first languages and Learning and Wellbeing Kits.
- Engagement levels in all areas of the CG Approach were impacted, particularly learning, employment and governance. However, engagement in health promotion and support increased.

2021

- Extensive focus on immunisation, community education and safety.
- Ongoing revisions and updates to Children's Ground's policies and Response Plan.
- Supporting individuals and families who were isolating with COVID.
- Responding to national and jurisdictional COVID and vaccination policies and working with staff who could not continue their employment with Children's Ground due to personal decisions on vaccination.
- Social distancing and travel limitations continued to impact delivery.
- Engagement levels in areas of the CG Approach outside of health affected, with people contracting COVID and being close contacts.

2022

- COVID community transmission become more widespread in early 2022 after Northern Territory borders opened in December 2021.
- Ongoing implementation, revisions and update to Children's Ground's policies and Response Plan based on changing legislation, conditions and information.
- Delivery and engagement were impacted due to extensive community transmission.
- Children's Ground's COVID responses to supporting individuals and families who were isolating with COVID increased significantly.

Across the three years of this evaluation period, the following COVID-19 support occurred with all four communities:

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY PLANS: these identified people at risk, with existing health conditions, what would be required should someone in the family contract COVID-19, if there were lockdowns or travel restrictions, etc. These included input from many family members to complete and update over time.

ELDER SUPPORT: individual health and action plans and support.

PLANS AND SUPPORT: for high-risk individuals (other

than Elders).

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES: to relocate to homelands if desired.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING: household clean up kits, including hygiene and cleaning products.

NUTRITION & FOOD SECURITY: meal delivery for Elders and those at risk or in isolation. Children's Ground became a distribution hub for food security and essential resources.

HEALTH PROMOTION AND EDUCATION RESOURCES: development and dissemination both at Children's Ground and more broadly, in partnership

with other organisations. Key messages in first languages, such as posters, videos, signage, etc and communications – adopted beyond CG by other communities.

LEARNING AND WELLBEING: learning kits developed by Children's Ground educators enabled cultural educators with family-led learning, particularly for families who relocated to homeland outstations where other Children's Ground staff could not attend daily.



3.3: REGIONAL AND COMMUNITY DATA SNAPSHOT

Significant regional, community and family leadership were shown during this period. Empowering First Nations leaders of Children's Ground was central to the COVID-19 response. In turn, this empowered whole families in decision-making about how to protect themselves from COVID-19.

Additional dedicated COVID-19 resources (financial and material) received during this time contributed to Children's Ground's capacity for such an extensive COVID-19 response. This section presents a snapshot of point in time data, including:

- **PUBLICLY AVAILABLE EXTERNAL DATA.**

- **INTERNAL BASELINE DATA** collected by Children's Ground using our 'Story of Change' baseline survey (detailed below and in 'Method' section).

While the external data cannot be used for Children's Ground evaluation purposes, it aims to provide a snapshot of community and regional data relevant to the long-term outcomes of the CG Approach. This data will continue to be collated and reviewed as relevant context for Children's Ground's emerging impact over time.

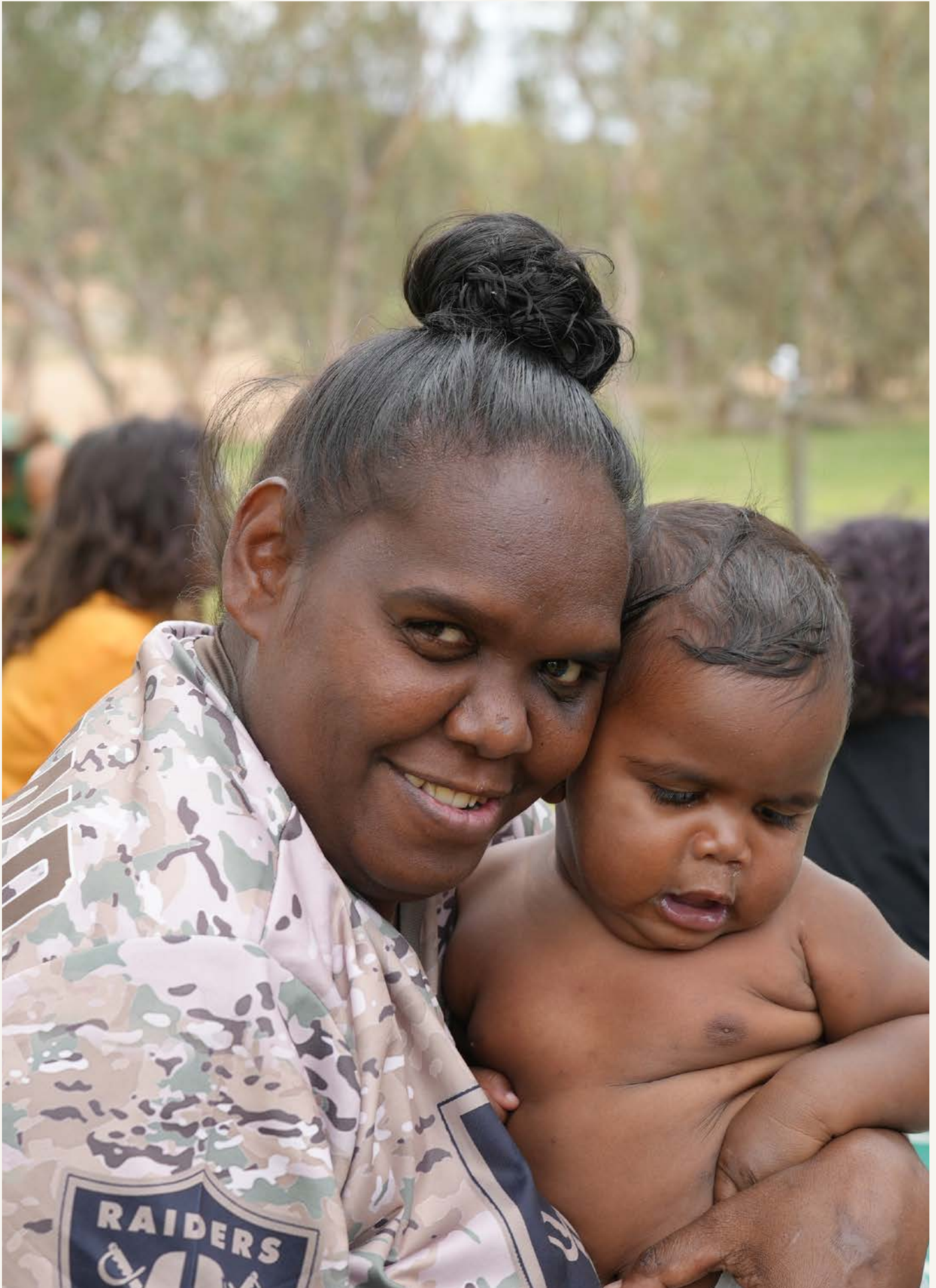
Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe operates in small communities where external administrative data sets are difficult to access at a local level, are often not accurate in terms of population representation or they do not exist. Therefore, across the external administrative data sets presented, there are inconsistent years and geographic boundaries.

Children's Ground's 'Story of Change' survey was designed by First Nations leaders in 2019 and has captured baseline data from 2020 to 2021, with 202 adults aged 18 years and over. The survey captures data about the current lived experience of First Nations people within the communities leading Children's Ground (and surrounds).

Data collected aligns with the long-term outcomes of the CG Approach and the current life circumstances that families want to see change for the current and future generations of children. It will be collected at points in time over the next 25 years to monitor changes. Over time, the children of today will complete this survey as young adults.

While this data was collected as a baseline after the CG Approach had begun operations, it collects data about changes that will only occur over the long-term. It was also important to establish First Nations governance and community relationships to enable this survey to be developed and completed by First Nations people, with their communities.

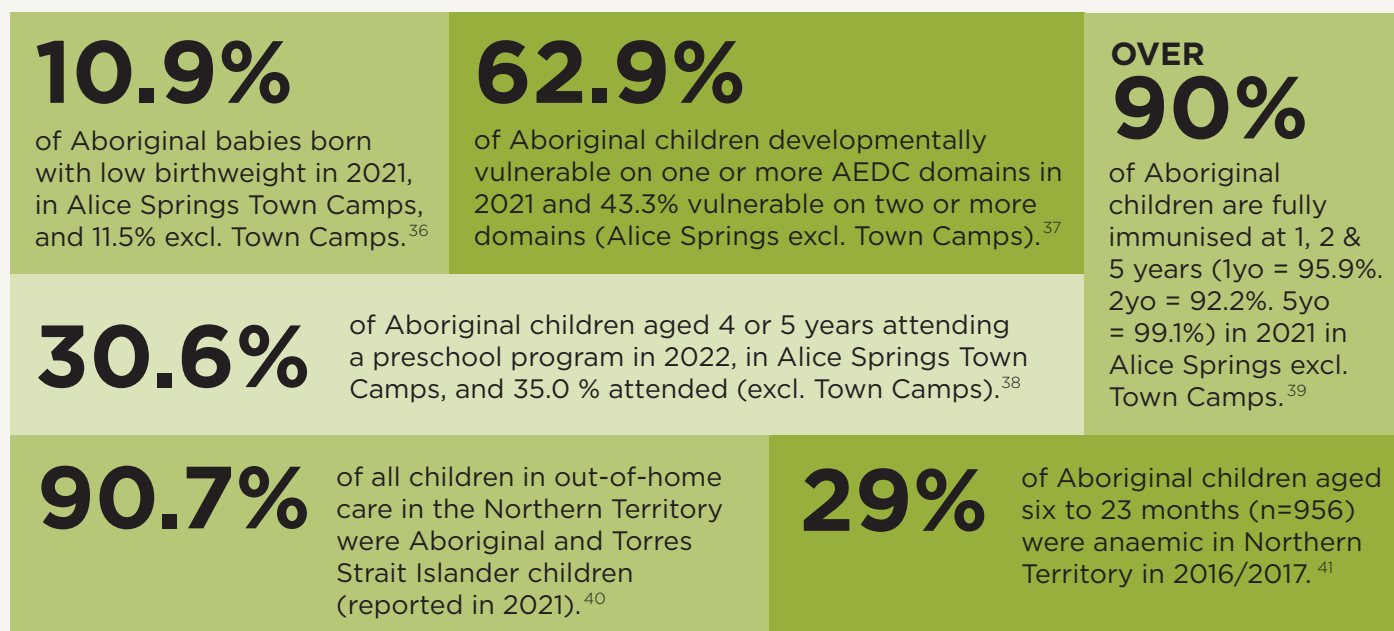




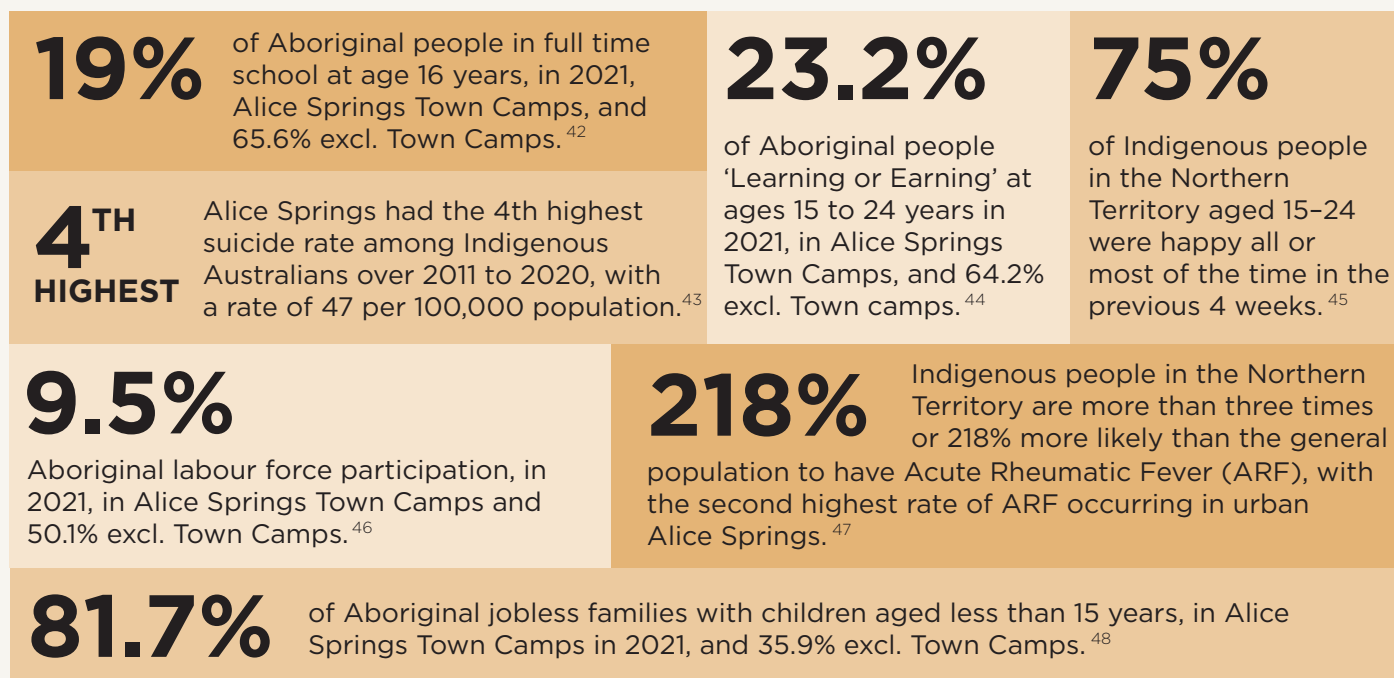
EXTERNALLY PUBLICLY AVAILABLE DATA

This external data is presented under key headings of children, then families, including young people and adults.

Children



Families - Young people and adults



³⁶ 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>. Low birthweight defined as less than 2,500g. Geography: Alice Springs. Year: 2021.

³⁷ 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>. Geography: Alice Springs. Year: 2022.

³⁸ 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>. Geography: Alice Springs excluding Town Camps. Year: 2021.

³⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2021. Child protection Australia. As seen in Reviewing implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child placement principle, Northern Territory.

⁴⁰ 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>. Geography: 2021. Alice Springs excluding Town Camps.

⁴¹ Leonard, Dymrna, et al. 2019. Anaemia in early childhood among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of Far North Queensland: a retrospective cohort study. *Australian and New Zealand journal of public health* 43.4: 319-327. Geography: Northern Territory. Year: 2016-17.

⁴² 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>. Geography: Alice Springs. Year: 2021.

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ *ibid*

⁴⁶ Australian Institute of Health & Welfare. 2017-21. Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease in Australia. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/52aa270e-4a4d-4260-89cb-396d4f4130c2/aihw-cyd-99.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Geographic variation in suicide risk and service delivery to Indigenous Australians. 2022. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Geography: Alice Springs. Year: 2011-2020.

⁴⁸ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adolescent and youth health and wellbeing 2018. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Geography: Northern Territory.

INTERNAL CHILDREN'S GROUND 25-YEAR BASELINE DATA

This internal baseline data is presented under key headings related to outcome areas of the CG Approach: First language & culture; Health and access; Social/emotional wellbeing; Employment; Safety & security.

FIRST LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

- **63%** of people reported not living on their traditional lands.
- **84%** reported speaking two or more languages and **57%** reported speaking three or more languages.
- **86%** of people reported understanding their Aboriginal language a lot or a fair bit of the time.
- **58%** and **64%** of people reported learning about their language and culture (respectively) either a lot, a fair, some or a little bit of the time – **42%** and **35%** not learning about their language and culture (respectively) at school at all.
- **83%** and **82%** of people reported Aboriginal language and culture (respectively) getting weaker in the past 10 years.

HEALTH AND ACCESS

- **66%** reported times when their family did not have enough food in the house in the past 12 months.
- **41%** reported going to hospital for serious illness/sickness.
- **57%** reported their health issues impacted their normal activities in the past few weeks.
- **56%** reported their health issues impacted their work or study in the past few weeks.
- **59%** reported they would access clinical health services if they were sick a lot or a fair bit of the time.
- **95%** reported they would access a traditional healer when they were sick.
- **64%** of people reported not having a working vehicle.
- **59%** reported times when their family did not have any power/electricity in the house in the past 12 months.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

- **63%** of people reported feeling good about themselves in the previous few weeks a lot or a fair bit of the time. **36%** reported feeling good some or a little bit of the time.
- **91%** reported experiencing sorry business (death of a family member or close friend) in the past 12 months.
- **56%** reported someone in their family dying by suicide.
- **60%** reported feeling low in the past 12 months.
- **66%** reported that a family member had spent time in jail in the past 12 months.
- **72%** reported feeling worried in the last 12 months.

EMPLOYMENT

- **77%** reported experiencing racism.
- **51%** of people reported their community feels very safe a lot or a fair bit of the time. **39%** reported some or a little bit of the time. **10%** reported their community never feels safe.
- **36%** of people reported experiencing homelessness in the past 12 months and **63%** reported experiencing overcrowding at home.
- **29%** reported experiencing interactions with the child protection system.
- **37%** reported experiencing domestic violence in the past 12 months and **68%** reported witnessing domestic violence.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

- **55%** of people reported being in paid employment. Of these:
 - **17%** of people reported they had never worked.
 - **56%** had last worked a number of years ago.
 - **27%** had last worked a number of months ago.

SECTION 4: EVALUATION FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Children's Ground is designed to address intergenerational and extreme entrenched injustice, inequity, exclusion and disadvantage at a community level. It is a long-term strategy to achieve long-term change.

As a 25-year strategy, the CG Approach embedded the key building blocks, to be implemented over time, to achieve long term sustainable change. Critical to the strategy is not only *what* services are delivered but also *how*.

The 'how' is guided by Children's Ground's ten principles, valuing dignity, respect, empowerment, agency, opportunity and inclusion as central to achieving and sustaining impact and change. Both delivery and outcomes focus on children, families and communities, knowing that change is required at all levels.

Access and engagement are two fundamental progress indicators and short-term outcomes required for any approach to be successful. These conditions, in the First Nations context, can be difficult to achieve due to practical barriers (e.g. transport or where services are delivered) as well as socio-cultural-political and systems barriers (including fear, racism, language, injustice and power).

The early stages of the CG Approach focus on establishing engagement, trust, safety, empowerment and leadership with First Nations communities. Early stages of delivery also focus on establishing and building the necessary conditions and experiences for children and families to engage and thrive over the long term. The Children's Ground integrated service system is key to these conditions.

The first evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe (2017 to 2019) demonstrated that key building blocks and foundations for long-term change were established and

effective, evidenced through engagement, empowerment and access to services and environments that were culturally based and safe. The evaluation also evidenced early change and impact for children and families across key outcomes of education, health, employment, empowerment and safety.

Throughout this evaluation period, consolidating access, equity and engagement was a focus, with the intention of creating a 'new normal' for children and families and communities. For these communities with a history of either no/poorly accessible services or short-term programs, the aim was to establish accessible, regular, reliable and quality service access (as shown previously in Figure 8 – Children's Ground stages over time).

Recognising the limitations of the 'growth model' and given the history of stop-start programs in First Nations communities resulting in a lack of consistency and time to see impact, it was important for Children's Ground to set clear and achievable expectations with First Nations leaders and communities.

This evaluation assesses the multiple drivers for change within the CG Approach. Progress is assessed against key baseline data and builds on evidence from the first evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia.

This evaluation is presented through these key evaluation questions:

- **PROCESS FINDINGS:** Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended? In this case, in the context of a 'growth model', compared to the full CG Approach.
- **IMPACT FINDINGS:** What progress occurred towards longer term impact against evaluation outcomes?
- **SYSTEMS CHANGE ANALYSIS:** What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and any early progress towards impact (Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, Evaluation)? What contribution was made towards broader Systems reform?

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

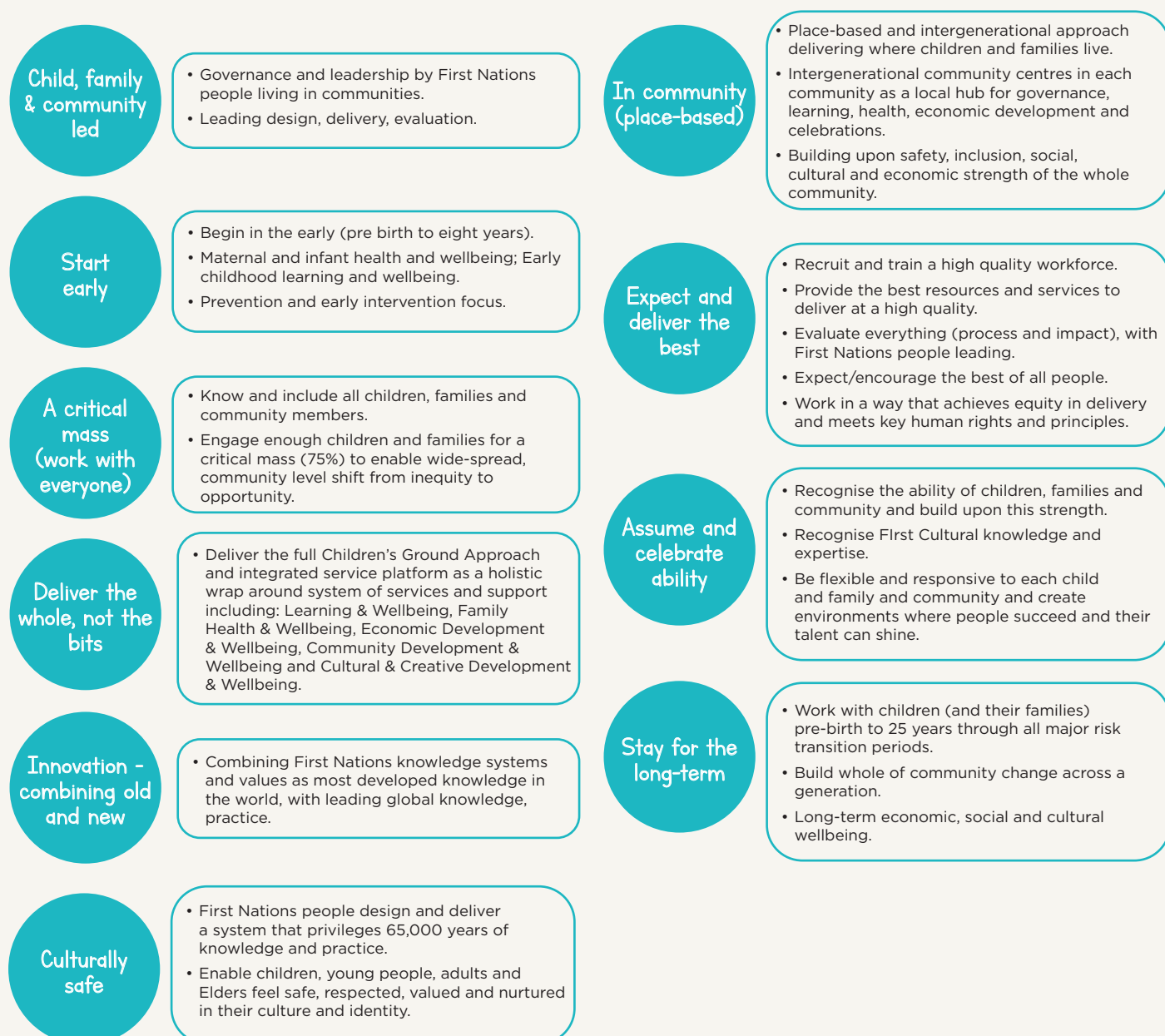


4.1: PROCESS EVALUATION

The CG Approach focuses on ‘what’ services are delivered and ‘how’ they are delivered. How the CG Approach is delivered is guided by ten practice principles of the Approach. The assumption of the CG Approach is that all principles must be met to achieve systems change. This section evaluates the extent to which the CG Approach has been implemented as intended from 2020 to 2022 across its principles.

Figure 11 articulates each principle. Note the tenth principle of ‘Culturally safe’ was added in 2020 and was not part of the 2017 to 2019 evaluation. Prior to this, culturally-centred and safe practice was assumed to be prioritised across all principles. It was decided that giving this formal visibility was important for a full understanding of the CG Approach.

FIGURE 11: CG APPROACH 10 PRACTICE PRINCIPLES



This section includes key evaluation findings for each principle, presented and analysed as follows:

- A summary of 'What is being evaluated within the principle?'
- Evaluation data and progress measured against the intention and aims of the full CG Approach.
- A brief findings summary.
- First Nations analysis of key findings.



SUMMARY OF PROCESS FINDINGS

The process evaluation looks at ten operational principles of the CG Approach and the integrity of implementation.

This second evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia found that Children's Ground implemented the CG Approach with integrity to the principles, building on the initial three-year period of operations (2017 to 2019).

The evidence indicates that Children's Ground successfully implemented the ten principles consistently and concurrently, but with varying levels of strength.

Key findings and summaries in relation to evidence of process effectiveness and progress Children's Ground made in relation to each practice principle are presented here, using a traffic light system to assess the progress of the growth model.

"Yeah, 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

**ON-TRACK
AND EFFECTIVE****STRENGTHENING
REQUIRED****NOT
ON-TRACK**

10 CG PRINCIPLES	2017-19	2020-22	FINDINGS SUMMARY
Child, family and community-led			Overall, community governance of Children's Ground has strengthened, with delivery and engagement increasing. Authority of Elders was embedded. Regional governance for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe strengthened with the establishment of First Nations only Governance, reportedly valued as an important space by First Nations staff/family members. Community-by-community governance also increased in engagement and delivery and became more embedded throughout this evaluation period. Daily governance (informal discussions and decisions as they arise daily) continued in practice however data collection was difficult given the informal nature of engagement. Local community governance remains an area for ongoing development due to challenges with place-based infrastructure and staff not being permanently based in community.
Start early			Children's Ground continued to implement this principle effectively through increased access to and engagement in early learning, nutrition and health promotion and literacy for young children and their families. This principle was implemented as intended within available resources. However, staff/families state the need to engage more children and families. Strategy and resources are required to increase both access and engagement.
A critical mass (work with everyone)			Almost achieved engagement of a critical mass (at least 75%). From 2017 to 2022, 73% of children aged 0-8 years engaged with Children's Ground. Reach and levels of engagement across children and families requires ongoing work. Not being permanently place-based within community also had an impact on achieving this principle at the quality required. While on track within the resources available, this principle has not yet been achieved to the extent intended as per the full CG Approach and further work on population mapping is required.

10 CG PRINCIPLES	2017-19	2020-22	FINDINGS SUMMARY
Deliver the whole, not the bits			Each of the five service areas of the CG Approach were all strengthened during the period, although at times affected by the impact of COVID-19. Progress was made in strengthening internal integration, with reported increases and improvements in integration across the service platform. However, key enabling systems and processes continue to require strengthening. Local service collaboration also increased and became more wide-ranging, influenced by delivery growth. Some collaborations are strong and integrated while others remained ad hoc, often impacted by staff turnover across organisations. Ongoing work is required to ensure regular communication within service relationships to embed collaborations in systems and processes across the organisations. A highly transient non-First Nations workforce is common in remote areas. Both internal integration and collaboration with local services require the full CG Approach to be in place to be sustainable, efficient and effective.
In community (place-based)			Progress was made through increased in-community delivery, however, permanent place-based delivery in communities is yet to be achieved due to external factors. Each Children's Ground community plan is led by local community staff who are residents. This enabled ongoing, strong place-based delivery of daily programs within location or on country. A hub and spoke model is occurring with delivery coordinated from the Children's Ground's central hub. This means that delivery remains 'to communities' rather than being permanently 'in community' per the intent of this principle and the CG Approach. Within this context, each community continued to prioritise place-based delivery, with all delivery occurring from the leadership and direction of community.

10 CG PRINCIPLES	2017-19	2020-22	FINDINGS SUMMARY
Innovation – combining the old and new ways			Effectively continued to implement this principle as intended. Progress included strengthening the centring of cultural knowledge and practice while integrating key western leading practice (e.g. on-country learning through to digital literacy resources in language and English and ongoing development of the Arrernte learning framework, resources and measurement tools). Recognising and centring leading cultural practice strengthened cultural capital within families and communities through increased opportunities in local First Nations employment, cultural teaching and learning, Eldership and knowledge translation into new mediums and practices.
Expect and deliver the best			Progress and increased effectiveness in key processes, delivery areas and organisational systems and supports has been achieved. Additional resourcing, improved systems, policies and processes are required to increase quality and effectiveness.
Assume and celebrate ability			Effectively embedding a culture of recognising and valuing people's strengths and abilities in ways that have been a foundation for building confidence, respect and trust. Celebration of achievements continues to be an important part of contributing to community wellbeing.
Culturally safe ⁴⁹	N/A		Implemented effectively and as intended. Identified as foundational enabler for engagement and employment in the CG Approach - giving people the confidence to engage because their family, language and culture are present, enacted and supported.
Stay for the long-term			Continued to build on the empowerment and early foundations for longevity established in the first evaluation period.

49 The principle of 'Culturally safe' was added in 2020 and was therefore not assessed in the same way in the first evaluation report.

Based on evaluation evidence, Children's Ground achieved integrity across its ten principles with strength in key principles such as 'child, family and community-led' and 'cultural safety,' and weaknesses in others such as 'place-based delivery'. The challenges are largely due to resource capacity as opposed to poor execution of the CG Approach.

A key driver for change is local governance and empowerment. A focus on taking the time to build relationships and empower people was central to engagement of children and families. Applying a strengths-based and culturally privileged approach provided an affirming environment for First Nations talent and leadership. This was evidenced by the engagement of First Nations people in systems and service design, delivery and evaluation. In turn, this created the cultural safety and positive experiences and environments for children from their earliest years – led by their families and communities.

The CG Approach was not implemented to the extent desired within the full model, with some areas of delivery significantly compromised by limited resources, and others progressing well. Children's Ground remains in a growth period until the full model is funded and implemented.

Evaluation evidence indicates that Children's Ground put in place key conditions for change that are recognised in the international and national evidence base.

The strongest of these include local governance and leadership, culturally safe, start early, strengths-based, in community, and holistic design and delivery.

In the context of national and international evidence and research, the CG Approach, as implemented through the ten principles, provides a comprehensive suite of conditions recognised as critical to positive change. These principles on their own are important, and together provide a service system framework that, if implemented fully, offers an exciting policy and practice framework for systems reform.



4.2: PROCESS EVALUATION FINDINGS

CHILD, FAMILY & COMMUNITY LED

"You feel empowered, like your opinion matters. Even if they go on a different way, or whatever it is, but you've had your say, and they've listened, they've acknowledged. It makes you feel good about yourself because you're not just in the background, everyone has a say. Yeah, it is just being at the front rather than just always being at the back."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

This principle recognises that children, families and whole communities should be integrally involved in the governance, design and delivery of their programs, services and solutions, including leading day-to-day operations. This includes recognising and enacting First Nations governance and leadership structures.

At an organisational level, Children's Ground equally recognises corporate governance and First Nations governance (authorised from the land and cultural authority). This structure places control for delivery, design, implementation and evaluation of the CG Approach in the hands of local communities in a structured authorising environment. The governance structure enables the principle to be implemented with integrity.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- The Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (First Nations Governance Committee) is leading regional governance for Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, with the voices of community members leading decision-making.
- Each community leads and governs the CG Approach in and with their community through a local approved community plan.
- All governance follows cultural governance protocols and processes determined by their country/land, Elders, family and cultural relationships.
- Daily governance occurs with children and families (as 'service users').
- Children and their families lead their learning, health, cultural and economic development.

OPPRESSION & EMPOWERMENT

Children's Ground recognises the oppressive and disempowering impact of colonisation on First Nations peoples' rights to govern their own affairs. Historical experiences include ongoing environments where non-First Nations people and the English language dominate decision-making. Children's Ground leaders have referenced a history of severe punishment and disabling conditions resulting from speaking up in the past. These experiences impacted First Nations peoples' safety, confidence and sense of worth and inclusion. The ongoing denial of First Nations laws and governance systems in western systems, services and structures further adds to this burden.

The CG Approach embeds formal and informal processes and structures that are the internal mechanisms to authorise enable, encourage and support First Nations people to engage in governance and decision-making about their own lives and about solutions to achieve their aspirations. There are regular open discussions about the impact of colonisation and targeted all-staff and governance activities that focus on learning and unpacking the history for Australia's First Nations people. This aims to support all staff to work with First Nations children and families in a way that is respectful and strength-based while contextualising intergenerational trauma and the impact of colonisation. The aim is to re-strengthen the authority, roles and relationships within First Nations governance which in turn are a key driver for empowerment and change.

"Sometimes the community takes turn to come into governance meetings. Sometimes the community comes together in meeting and have to hear what the other Elders and leaders are talking about... So, we want to say that they're coming there and doing really well and we're really proud of it, staying strong."

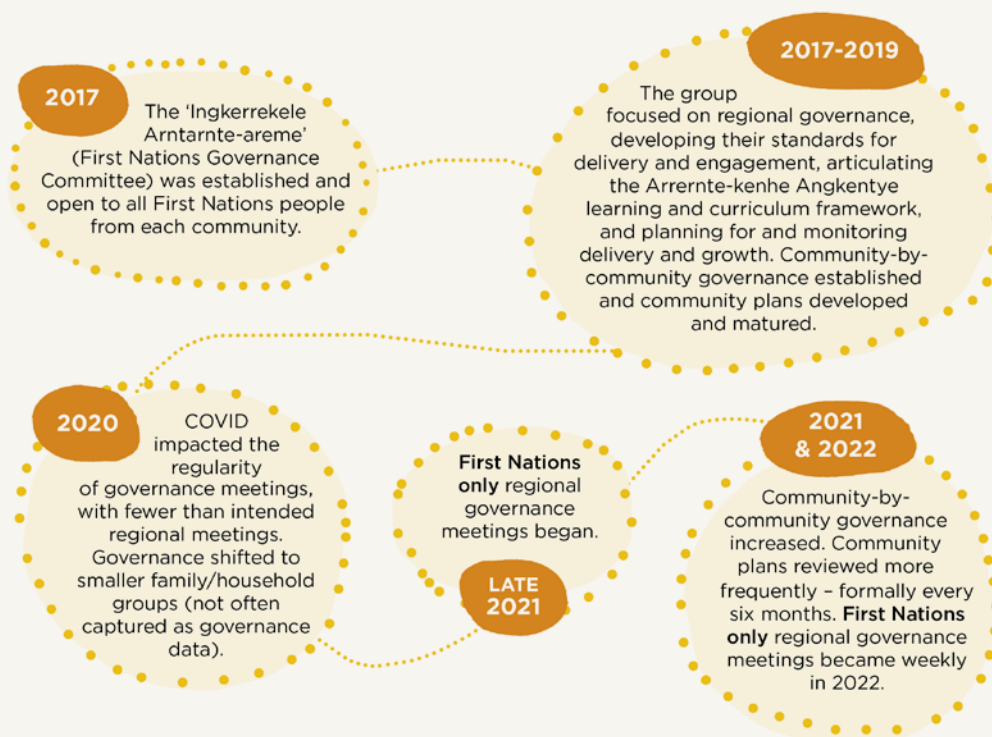
**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



GROWING AND STRENGTHENING FIRST NATIONS GOVERNANCE

At Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, the process of establishing and growing First Nations child, family and community leadership and governance was embedded from the outset. A brief history and progress of First Nations Governance is presented in Figure 12.

FIGURE 12: PROGRESS OF FIRST NATIONS GOVERNANCE FROM 2017 TO 2022

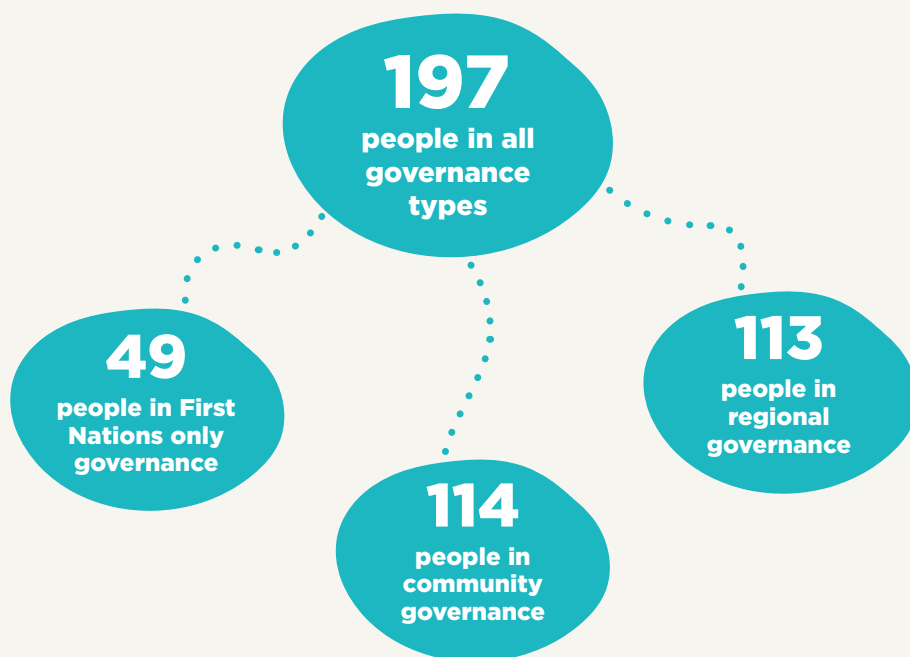


This evaluation period saw 197 First Nations people engaging in regional and community governance, an increase from 107 people across 2017 to 2019. First Nations governance is an inclusive system that includes roles, responsibilities and authorities through land, kinship and Eldership. Unlike western governance, which is a small group of elected members, First Nations governance requires collective input to ensure cultural protocols are met. This in turn impacts cultural safety, engagement and empowerment.

Table 1 shows the number of meetings and number of people involved in regional and community governance and decision-making by year and includes 2019 to show the growth in people and meetings. Figure 13 shows the number of people engaged in different types of governance.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF GOVERNANCE MEETINGS (ALL LEVELS AND TYPES) AND PEOPLE ENGAGED, BY YEAR

	2019	2020	2021	2022
All levels and types of First Nations governance (regional and community)				
No. of people	82	74	123	136
No. of meetings	38	22	45	94

FIGURE 13: ENGAGEMENT IN EACH TYPE OF FIRST NATIONS GOVERNANCE

Across the 2020 to 2022 evaluation period, engagement in all types of First Nations governance increased in frequency, engagement and strength, with the exception of 2020 which was impacted by COVID-19.

The most significant progress made in relation to this principle has been establishing First Nations only governance and increasing and strengthening community level governance.

First Nations only governance

Establishing and growing First Nations only governance demonstrated important growth and strengthening of First Nations leadership, empowerment and confidence. First Nations staff reported that this provided a safe space for people to speak openly and share opinions and perspectives they may not always feel comfortable or confident to share in the presence of non-First Nations staff.

While First Nations staff have always held governance authority at Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe, First Nations only governance established more responsibility and more opportunity in focussed leadership. It was assisted by growth in First Nations people in management

positions bringing in skills and experience amongst First Nations staff that had not previously been available.

As with regional and community governance, Children's Ground aims to continue strengthening First Nations only governance over time as an important way to authorise First Nations governance systems and to increase individual and collective agency, empowerment, responsibility and ownership.

Community-level governance

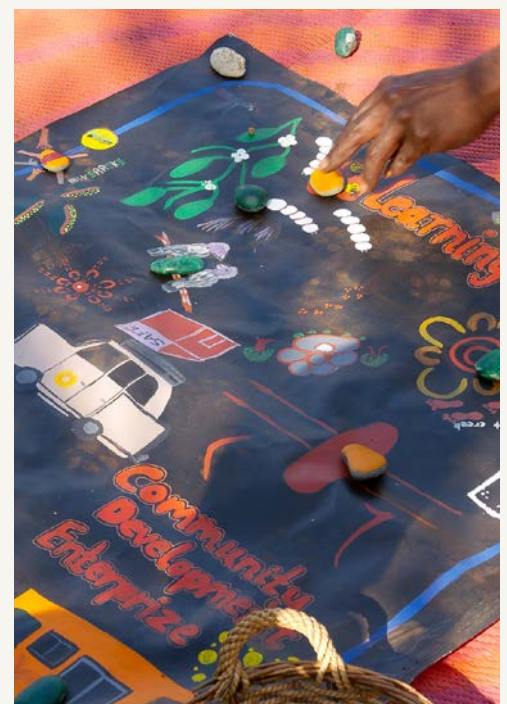
Strengthening community level governance was a priority focus during this evaluation period that progressed due to increased resources and delivery within communities.

During this evaluation period, community plans were documented in both a western format (in Word documents) as well as in formats decided and developed by First Nations leaders in each community, such as painting, as seen in Figure 14.

An observation in this area was that some people engaged in their community governance only and chose not to continue to engage in broader regional governance. The CG Approach has open membership to all levels of First Nations governance for any First Nations people living in and connected to community and family groups. People choose how and in what ways they are interested in leading the CG Approach within their community.

[illegible]

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023



Daily governance

Daily governance (informal discussions and decisions as they arise daily) continued in practice, however data collection was difficult given the informal nature of engagement. A review of documentation processes is required to better evidence the practice.

Local community governance remains an area for ongoing development due to challenges with place-based infrastructure and staff not being permanently based in community.

Individual and family decision-making

Children and their families are leading their learning, health, cultural and economic development. Reports from participants indicate that there is practice culture that centres children, families and individuals in their engagement at Children's Ground.

In some areas this is supported by formalised practices that are strengthening over time. The prevalence of individualised learning and wellbeing plans for children increased with all actively engaged children having a learning plan developed with their educators and family. However further work is required to embed the development and review of these plans systematically.

Family Health & Wellbeing plans were undertaken well during COVID-19 as families worked together to prepare as best they could for what was potentially ahead of them. The plans were critical in monitoring health and supporting access and maintenance of health goals. Outside of the context of COVID-19 however, Family Health & Wellbeing plans need to be more formalised, put into action and coordinated with other local health services. Family health and wellbeing plans continue informally with individuals and small family groups.

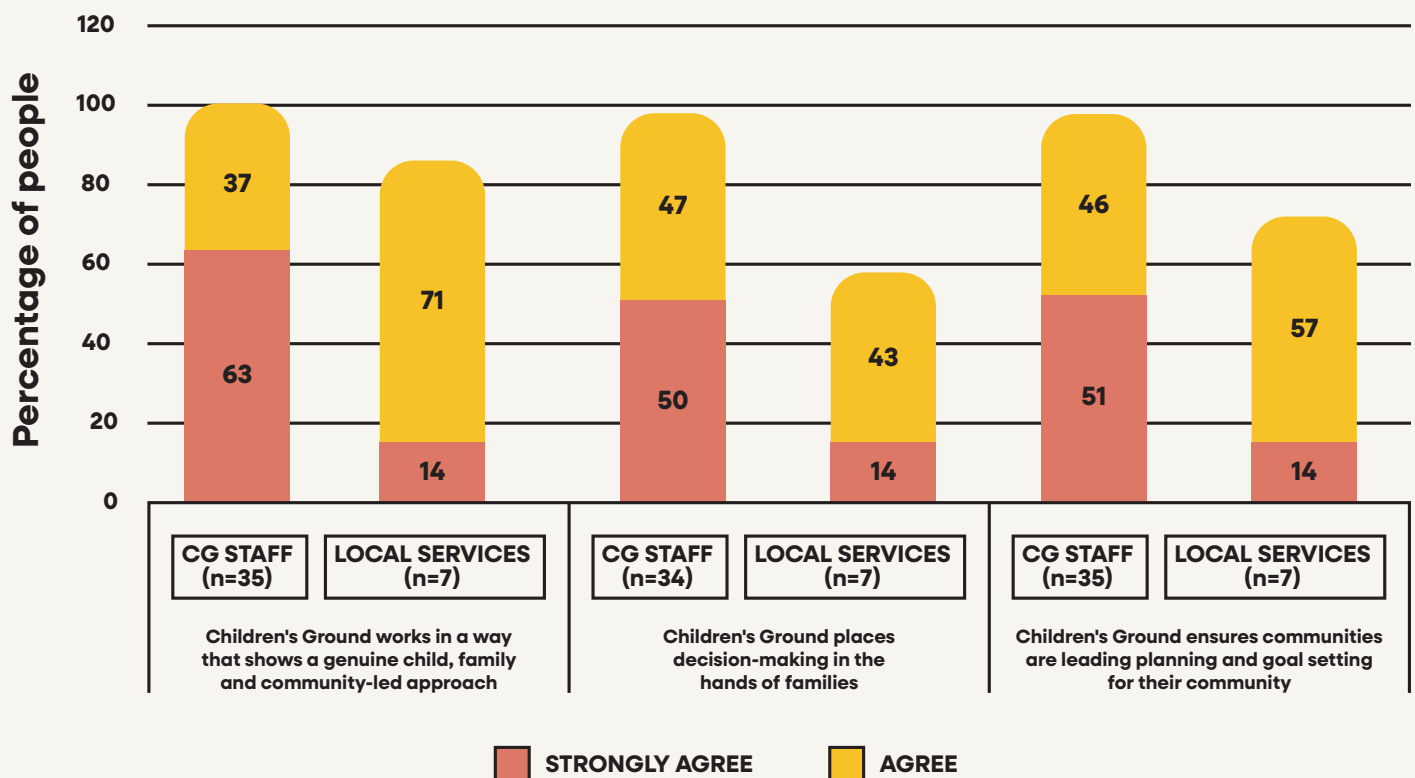
Individual work plans strengthened with the local First Nations workforce provided with wrap around support to address individual needs. The workforce system at Children's Ground provides the flexibility for people to engage and grow in employment according to their individual situation.

Children's Ground staff and local service perspectives

Via an anonymous survey, Children's Ground staff (n=18 First Nations and 17 non-First Nations) and local service stakeholders (n=7) were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements about the way Children's Ground works in a community-led manner. Graph 2 presents the findings for Children's Ground staff and local services.



GRAPH 2: THE EXTENT TO WHICH CHILDREN'S GROUND WORKS IN A COMMUNITY-LED MANNER



Between the two evaluation periods, there were no significant differences in the perspectives of Children's Ground staff and local services about the extent to which Children's Ground is community-led.

There was a slight increase in the percentage of

Children's Ground staff who reported community leadership, and a decrease in the percentage of local services reporting Children's Ground demonstrates placing decision-making in the hands of First Nations families. No local services disagreed with these statements.

The reduction was an increase in the percentage of services reporting they 'don't know.' This relates to a diverse range of services and organisations and the ways Children's Ground works with stakeholders, resulting in challenges with asking questions to which all stakeholders can respond.



VOICE, LEADERSHIP AND OWNERSHIP

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members were asked a series of questions about whether they feel like they are listened to at Children's Ground and if they feel like they are the ones making the important decisions. The strongest themes to emerge from their responses were:

1. First Nations voice and ownership.
2. Intergenerational cultural governance approaches and protocols.

From here, this section is broken up into these two themes, demonstrating areas where Children's Ground has been effective and a section that identifies areas for ongoing development and improvement.

Theme 1: First Nations voice and ownership

First Nations staff/family members talked about having the opportunity to speak up and have their voices heard through regional and community governance structures. They reported that First Nations voice and decision-making were represented at all levels throughout the organisation and were inclusive of families from different language groups living in each community.

"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... and having that space to do it."

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"They've got their own say, the families got their say on what's good for them and what's not. I like being heard. They always listen to me."

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I think that's [First Nations Governance] been respected and honoured, and anything that comes out of that is the word of the people and it is the voice of the Arrernte people, that governance group."

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"You've got two directors who are Arrernte, and then you have [XXX] and [XXX] [non-First Nations]. It's not just all non-First Nations at the top, and then it flows down... So, both voices are heard, and discussions are always had when it comes to planning and decision making, and I think that's one thing Children's Ground is really great at, is making sure everyone's heard."

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"Because we are the community that we serve, you know it is our children. And we do work here, so we need to make sure that we're happy to be here and free. If we're part of the decision making, then we know we have a say."

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

First Nations staff/family members reported and demonstrated their ownership of Children's Ground through their descriptions of how Children's Ground works, their roles and processes and structures that seek to privilege First Nations approaches and people as leaders and decision-makers.

"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 families are leading it. They're the ones running the sessions. They're the ones that want this. This is what they want in their communities. Whereas you have a lot of services coming and saying this is what needs to be done or this is what we're doing now... Whereas [at Children's Ground] it's just like, this is what we want done, this is how we're going to do it."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"It's not one way of doing things, it's how we [Arrernte people] want to work. That's why it makes it good, you know... it's good to have this thing, you run it the way you want to run it in different communities."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

The history and impact of oppression, attempted genocide and imposed structures that have deliberately denied the right of First Nations people to exercise control over their lives means that re-building the confidence of First Nations people can be a slow journey – within which each individual is on their own path and their own pace.

"When you get First Nations meeting in place, so we can talk about it in language in there and then write down on paper and just – because we're the ones who make the decisions for our families. So, we've got that meeting, that First Nations meetings we have. It gives us a chance to talk about how we work together at Children's Ground and plan everything. Talk about the people that want to help and we help each other."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We need more cultural governance, like how we do our own governance. But I think we need more First Nations governance meetings."

**45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Many First Nations staff/family members reported feeling good, respected, stronger and feeling "seen and heard" because of their work and leadership in Children's Ground and their community. They reported their confidence growing over time, in themselves, in their work and in speaking up and using their voice in ways and places they had not previously felt comfortable to do so. People reported feeling proud of what they were doing with and for their children and families – proud of themselves and proud of the children and young people in their family.

Some referred to their pride stemming from being decision-makers at Children's Ground, while others referred to these feelings as stemming from just being asked their opinion and being given the opportunity and space to contribute.

"I'm going to meetings when there's meetings on, maybe sometimes if I've got something to say I speak up during the meeting. I'm always feeling good about speaking up, and I don't feel shy about it anymore."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I think there's a lot of pride that Children's Ground does that [First Nations Governance] and holds that pretty much at the centre of all of the things we do, and there is that pride of Children's Ground is ours. Ours and Arrernte people saying it but also ours as in whoever's in the Arrernte family. There're other families that aren't Arrernte... but this is theirs because we are, our language and culture are valued here."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Proud. It makes me want to better myself too because if I'm seen as one of the young leaders or I'm not even that young anymore but as a leader, emerging, like upcoming leader or whatever, I do know that I'm a leader in my family."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I do see like the fellas here, those fellas I've never heard talk outside of here until I've come here. I've always known them all my life and I've always seen them but I've never heard them speak. And to see them have a place here, it's makes you feel good to see that they now feel comfortable... I look at the young fellas like [XXX] and how confident they talk. And I just look at them with so much pride... I almost get teary... and I can see that they really hold a space here and that they have that pride to talk about Children's Ground and they really speak to the issues, and they really know what they're talking about too."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



“First Nations staff. We meet together once a week and plan. See how things have been going. ‘What’s been happening out wherever?’ Talk about how it’s working. ‘Is it going good? How many people come? Are there other people out there that want to come in and work?’”

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

First Nations staff/family member quotes evidenced that Children’s Ground strengthened First Nations governance. Formal and informal structures enabled engagement and contributed to increased feelings of empowerment, confidence and pride and of ‘being heard.’ Specifically, formally establishing First Nations only governance meetings strengthened local voice, decision making and regional governance.

Between the 2017 to 2019 and 2020 to 2022 evaluation periods, there was a noticeable shift away from people seeming grateful to have a voice, to people articulating their ownership of Children’s Ground, the importance of First Nations governance and decision-making.

Theme 2: Intergenerational cultural governance approaches and protocols

In evaluation interviews, the majority of First Nations staff/family members referred to First Nations governance practices and leadership across generations. People talked about the leadership of Elders as the critical authority for all decision-making which creates safety and certainty to the cultural and operational leadership. This is in the context of First Nations kinship and skin systems⁵⁰ which create roles and responsibilities that children assume at birth. Governance process reinforce this through practice.

⁵⁰ The Arrernte kinship system includes eight skin names. All Arrernte people belong to one of these skin groups. This defines relationships and responsibilities to the land and to one another.

People referred to young people being actively encouraged to assume roles and responsibilities within this context, as next generation leaders.

Eldership, gender protocols and the right people speaking for traditional lands and country were regularly referred to as important cultural governance processes. People also regularly reported the importance of Elders being present in governance and in Learning & Wellbeing sessions alongside children and families. They referred to Elders as the decision-makers and as those who guide, teach and support the current generation of adults and young people.

“We always listen to the Elders because they’re the ones, our boss, not us. The Elders, they’re the boss.”

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“It’s [decision-making] always referred to the director, like the Elders, the Akgerrapate mob. The Elders, any decisions, it’s always taken back to the Akgerrapate, the Elders and the directors, like the First Nations directors.”

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Elders’ governance includes leading, guiding and teaching the future generations. Intergenerational leadership was referred to as including children and young people as the next generation leaders, as well as young people and adults already emerging as leaders. It was reported that this is important for the protection of languages, cultural knowledge and connections to country and can only be achieved by working with people of all ages. Responses contributing to this theme came from the current generation of Elders, adults and young people as emerging leaders.

“We talk to them [young people], ‘You’ve got to be the next leader soon.’ You’ve got to talk up, if you want to be in the leadership role, you’ve got to do this and that. Learn to speak up. And we give them space too. If they want to learn, give them space and they can do it at their own pace.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“It’s been good. You know, because it’s hard to get new generation leaders so it’s been working out good for the young ones, kele mwerre [very good], they’ve been heard.”

**35-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Yeah, we carry on what our old people left, and it’s up to us to teach the younger generation all that.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“The Elders will make it up to the leaders. The leaders going to make it up to the young people. That’s how we share on our message, pass it to the young generation. It comes from the Elders to the leaders and goes to the younger generation.”

**40-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

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

generation to generation. Apmere mwerre atnyenetyeke, arntarnte-irreme, like looking after the apmere.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Many people referred to the importance of Elders and adults in role modelling and supporting the development of young emerging leaders. This was often coupled with people’s worries about the passing of Elders who hold a lot of the cultural knowledge. However, it was often talked about in the context of focusing on teaching the next generation of leaders.

First Nations staff/family members reported that cultural governance, protocols, roles and responsibilities are respected and supported at Children’s Ground. This was particularly relevant for First Nations people living within their cultural laws and kinship with associated roles and responsibilities, as well as living within western systems of law and society. There are significant differences between cultural and western systems that makes the types, roles and contexts of governance and leadership a key consideration at all levels across Children’s Ground.

People referred to the importance and safety of following cultural governance and decision-making protocols. This included the collective nature of decision-making, work and actions being undertaken and agreed to by more than one person. This theme also links with Children’s Ground’s principle of ‘Culturally safe’, reported further on in this process findings section.



“Children’s Ground respects that process, yeah. And you see it a lot when Children’s Ground has to put stuff on hold because they haven’t passed it to the right people... And that’s the thing, you have your deadlines but at the same time if you can’t find that person then you can’t pass anything.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“It’s a safety thing [cultural governance and decision-making protocols] where you always get someone else to know your story and back you up. Even with stories or translation or a decision that you’ve made, you always have to have someone that’s agreed to it.”

**45-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“There’s certain areas that I can’t go in and there’s certain areas that other people can’t go into. Women’s research, that’s women’s business, same as if young men were starting up with programs for them, that’d be young men’s business. That’s adhering to cultural law, nothing wrong with that.”

**65+ YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

First Nations staff/family member quotes evidenced that strong cultural governance was achieved through processes that created the space, time and conditions to follow cultural governance protocols and that supported individuals with their leadership development and growth.

Evident in many responses about intergenerational cultural governance and leadership was the importance of first language and culture as the foundation for teaching adults, young people and children about their cultural knowledge, practices, roles and responsibilities to family and country.

Areas for ongoing development

While First Nations governance was considered very strong, there were key areas for improvement identified throughout the evaluation interviews. Some people reported that Children’s Ground needs to listen more and that there is a need to increase the engagement of three key groups, including: the voice of men, the voice of young people and the voice of people requiring additional support to engage in governance. It was also identified that some people don’t engage consistently enough in governance meetings to understand everything that is being discussed, which can result in them not feeling like they are fully engaged in governance at Children’s Ground.

“I think it’s just in the middle, how I see it. I think Children’s Ground should be like more into listening to Arrernte families, not only Arrernte family, like different languages group as well because we’ve got some other languages that works with Children’s Ground, more like listening to everyone.”

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I think they [some families] do need a lot of support [to engage in governance]. For doing that, they need a lot of support and help for the other families that don't do it, you know? I think they need more support."

**45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Sometimes they [non-First Nations staff] think they're listening but they're not, there's no understanding or listening properly. They can hear but they're not really listening."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Get more community leaders. Train up some more young people. Because we are led by children and family, in the community. But we need more young people to be involved in leading us right now. We are family-led. That would be what the children are learning."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Some people do say they don't feel like they've been listened to but that's because they don't understand the whole thing. Every opportunity is there, and they [Children's Ground] encourage you... We have that space but it's just whether people are consistent enough to feel like they've been heard. Be consistent and you know you won't miss out on anything."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We need more leaders. We need more young men leaders, like right now there's a lot of women talking for the men and everybody, for the community. We need more men standing up and talking up for the community and for our women and children."

**40-50 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Continuing to expand and strengthen all levels of First Nations governance is an ongoing strategy to deconstruct the status quo of top-down power and control, shifting to bottom-up community leadership and control that also privileges people's first culture and leadership.



SUMMARY

Children's Ground is on track with being child, family and community-led. Evaluation evidence demonstrates that this principle has been implemented extensively and as intended. In the national context of colonisation and the historical oppression of First peoples' voices, establishing the conditions for local First Nations leadership and empowerment is a prominent achievement in this evaluation.

Between 2020 and 2022, First Nations governance in strategic and operational planning and decision-making strengthened, building on the progress from 2017 to 2019. Data shows that Children's Ground has established governance structures and practices that are consistent with First Nations protocols and cultural responsibilities. This was enabled by a range of opportunities for First Nations people to have agency and power in decision-making within their communities and at different levels across the region.

During the period, Children's Ground continued to mature governance systems by prioritising spaces where First Nations leadership could occur in a First Nations way. This was central to authorising culturally centred design, delivery and integrity and increased empowerment and responsibility in leadership.

First Nations staff/family member quotes demonstrate that:

Governance systems and processes also enabled people the right and opportunity to follow and adhere to cultural governance systems and protocols, with the time and space to ensure decisions were being made in the right way and by the right people to create cultural safety.

There continue to be some areas of governance that community leaders want to strengthen including the engagement of more people, specifically more young people and men. Systematically embedding some key governance documentation also requires strengthening.

The evaluation indicates that the short-term progress and conditions required to achieve and sustain self-determination and empowerment were being achieved, with local governance evidenced as the cornerstone of the CG Approach.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

**ANWERNE AMPE-KENHE
AHELHELE IWERRE ARRATYE
ALHETYEKE AKWETE
COMMUNITY-ELE ARLKE
APENTETYEKE
(COMMUNITY TO LEAD THE WAY)**

People are saying they have the opportunity to talk here. People are being asked and being listened to and heard. Even if their idea isn't the final decision. People feel valued because they are being asked their opinion and people are listening.

There's the opportunity and space to talk. When people want to talk they can. People might not always use the space, but it is there. People are being empowered to choose, too. Not everyone wants to talk in every meeting, but everyone is given the opportunity and space.

First Nations governance is a safe space for people to speak their mind because they know everyone and are comfortable with people. It gives people a voice and a chance to talk with some more confidence. It's different now with First Nations governance. So many people talk more now. But people are saying we need more First Nations governance meetings.

People who don't come to governance consistently – they don't always have that confidence to speak up. But those who come regularly do and you see that. Even if it's very minimal and sometimes some people will just nod their head. There are people who still need more support and encouragement to engage in governance.

Each group [community] is governing their own group too. They have autonomy over their own groups. People feel valued that they govern their own little communities. Because each of the communities are different and that's respected here.



People can see that the families are leading in their own areas. It's not someone coming in and saying you need to do it this way. It's the families saying let's do this and being supported to achieve that.

**People aren't just at the back.
Everyone is brought to the
front. We go around and hear
from everyone. No one's in the
background.**

**People feel heard. People feel
respected that they have been asked.**

Some people said that some non-First Nations staff think they are listening, but they are not hearing, not understanding. It can be hard for people to talk about what they want in English and about things that you just teach naturally out bush that you don't have to explain with all the detail. Sometimes we need that deeper listening and to make sure people have the space to figure out how to say what they want in a way that non-First Nations staff can understand.

But sometimes some people are still getting their head around everything talked about in governance and that's why they don't feel heard. We talk about everything about the organisation, so it can be hard for some people to get everything. People who come to governance regularly know it because we are always talking about it. But we need to support and encourage some people to come more so they can know it all too.

When people say they are not listened to, sometimes it's because they don't know the whole story. The opportunity is there for everyone all the time, and if people come consistently, they understand the whole story.

People say that Children's Ground belongs to the families. Like our Arrernte mob own it. It's like the first place where our people have that control. We haven't been taken over by other people's things and what other people want. It's like we are staying true to why we started Children's Ground. And we have other families who aren't Arrernte here, but they know Children's Ground is theirs too – they still feel it's theirs because there's a connection there.

A lot of people talk about the next generation and young people and encouraging them and bringing them into roles they can do to learn.

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

The older people are always trying to encourage them to get their confidence up in the hope that they are going to want to do more. Putting it back to the young people and having that space there that they can go at their own pace to learn – that opportunity's there, that space is there for young people. Like people have said, they are the next generation. It's about putting that confidence in them.

People are given that space and encouragement. There is that pride in speaking up and seeing young people speak up. One person talked about getting teary seeing some young people speak up. There is just this space for everyone here to talk on everything.

And all those little things we do like going around to every person to say, 'what do you think, what do you think,' even if it takes hours, even if people just say one word, because then gradually it's two words, then three, and then a sentence. For a lot of people that one word can be really daunting the first time.

All those little things we are doing are actually really big things. It's those small things that make a bigger impact. Some people might want to say something, but they don't jump up and say it, but because we go around the room they are having an opportunity to say it. It's also because if you're not the eldest in the room you have to think about that. You can't be overstepping.

The people are the ones with the knowledge about their community. They're living in it and trying to change it, while living in it.

That's why when people get to know what Children's Ground is for and about and what it does, they get that courage to speak – because they know what their communities need.

People are having a say about how their children are taught. It's not just one-way education.



At Children's Ground, the kids get to learn about language and culture and who they are and where they are from, and which country and areas they are connected to. And families know what's best for their families and they are leading the decision-making and seeing what works for each child and family and community. And they have the space to assess – to figure out what works and what doesn't. People are always assessing themselves in how they are going. It can be week-to-week and day-to-day. We have a plan, but things come up and we have the flexibility to change it, and people are making those decisions on what works best for their kids – and it's constant all the time assessing as they go along. It is the First Nations voice that is speaking for those decisions – and having that power, because they are leading it.

People understand that there are different types of leadership and that we have that space here to be given the opportunity to lead, and young people feeling like they can, and especially for their families.

There are people talking here who have never been given an opportunity like this, to lead – they were just employees. These are people that are leading here and building that confidence.

People are owning their roles and owning their positions in their communities. And it's shared. And if the main person who has always done it can't be there then the next one can step up within the family. And that's that encouragement too. People talked about not knowing they were a leader until someone said it to them. And you can hear M.K. [Elder] saying that to people, "You do that, you're allowed to do that." So, some people didn't realise they were allowed to lead. Some people just need to be told from an Akgerrapate [Elder], "You lead that." Some people don't know they are leading. But then you start acting like a leader and seeing that these people value me, and I am a leader. It's planting those seeds in people's heads too, that everyone can be a leader – thinking I can do this.



**START
EARLY**

*"Start with the little ones...
it's like a drop in the ocean or
drop in the pond and you can see
the ripples come out.
Like the water."*

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

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 future wellbeing for children⁵¹.

Starting early with childhood development, learning, health and wellbeing is central to all delivery across the CG Approach for children from pre-birth to their early years. Wrap around services and conditions are designed to hold the space for children to grow with confidence, opportunity and freedoms. The CG Approach to starting early recognises and works with the ability and strengths of children, as well as the risks. The aim is to create the conditions for children to thrive as well as to prevent systems abuses that can create childhood risks from service systems based on deficit and crisis.

This principle focuses on early childhood and early intervention with children and families. If successful, this focus will decrease and prevent health issues that can become chronic and debilitating, prevent child removal, incarceration, school exclusion, family violence, cultural harm, homelessness and economic hardship. While not all these things can be fully prevented, the long-term outcome is to achieve significant minimisation across these serious issues which have been prevalent for many First Nations people of the current and past generations. In addition, when risks do arise, minimising harm through early intervention wherever possible is also designed within the CG Approach.

To achieve this change, the whole of the CG Approach is required: all principles and all conditions. This principle is about ensuring that the critical foundations in early childhood are established to enable this change.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Children's Ground is working with children pre-birth to five years old, and their family.
- Early learning and wellbeing sessions are being delivered weekly, with integrated cultural and western health promotion.
- Early intervention is being achieved through internal service integration and external local service collaboration.

⁵¹ 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.

STARTING EARLY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

From 2020 to 2022, 354 children 0-5 years participated across the CG Approach, engaging alongside their family – with 386 children and young people aged 6-17 years and 675 adults also engaged as immediate, extended and kinship family relationships. The majority of child (0-5 years) engagement was in early learning and universal and targeted health promotion and support.

In evaluation interviews, some First Nations staff/family members reported that:

“It’s going good because we are starting early with the little ones and starting from when they’re newborns really.”

**20-30 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“And now they’ve [Children’s Ground] got real big, there’s a big mob of little ones coming here. Even the mothers and the mothers-to-be, they always come there.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“It’s good at Children’s Ground, taking kids everywhere, it’s all about the kids... Everything’s changed, when you go around with Children’s Ground. There was nothing to do for those little ones at home.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

EARLY LEARNING AND WELLBEING DELIVERY

During this evaluation period, with the resources available, the aim was that early learning delivery would remain 3-4 days per week within each community. COVID-19 and persistent grief, loss and sorry business impacted this being achieved in each year of this evaluation period.

Despite the ongoing disruptions to early learning, the number of learning sessions delivered increased between first (2017 to 2019) and second (2020 to 2022) evaluation periods. Figure 15 shows the number of learning and wellbeing sessions delivered from 2020 to 2022, by semester. The data includes 2019 semester two to show the progress between evaluation periods.

The number of children engaged in learning and wellbeing is presented in the impact findings section under Outcome: Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning & are creative problem solvers.



FIGURE 15: OCCASIONS OF LEARNING AND WELLBEING DELIVERY, BY SEMESTER

Across the evaluation period, the target of delivering early learning 3-4 days a week per community was not achieved consistently due to COVID-19 restrictions and outbreaks. There was a decrease in early learning delivery across semester two of 2021 and semester one of 2022 due to the impact of COVID-19 with many staff impacted by contracting COVID-19 in semester one in 2022. By semester two 2022, sessions had increased.

Delivery and engagement opportunities were also limited by the growth model. For example, there were times where there were not enough bus seats to take all the children and families on country who were wanting to attend. Without sufficient resources (vehicles and staff), it is not expected that all communities will be able to deliver early learning and wellbeing to the extent intended.

During this evaluation period, resources were maintained for dedicated western and cultural educators for each community. With this, the learning team were able to increase the quality and consistency of cultural and western delivery, and to increase delivery of learning focused camps over a few days. Further development

also occurred of first language and culture learning resources used in early learning delivery.

CHILD HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Throughout the evaluation period, child health was delivered through universal health promotion integrated and delivered in all learning sessions as well as targeted health support for children. Health promotion was also integrated into extended hours informal learning sessions and family/community events and celebrations.

As detailed in Appendix 2, universal health promotion included: nutrition, healthy hygiene routines, maternal and child health, cultural health promotion, health and wellbeing check-ins, social/emotional wellbeing, physical health promotion, creative arts, music, dancing, singing, etc. Health promotion activities were delivered in every early learning session. Universal health promotion was delivered on 1,295 occasions, which is an average of 735 occasions per year over the three-year evaluation period. This is an increase from an average of 251 occasions across 2017 to 2019.

From 2020 to 2022, 350 young children (0-5 years) engaged in universal and targeted health promotion activities, knowledge and skill development – within and outside of early learning delivery. This is an increase from 244 in the 2017 to 2019 evaluation period. Further, from 2020 to 2022, 381 children and young people aged 6-17 years and 619 adults 18+ years also engaged, with whole families building their health literacy and agency.

Increasing access to health promotion and health literacy and skills in environments where children and families feel safe and comfortable has been evidenced by regular engagement in health promotion in early learning.

Prevention and early intervention aim to be achieved through internal service integration undertaken in flexible and deliberate ways that enable relational-based engagement and responsive delivery. Early intervention also aims to be achieved through collaboration with external local services. These processes are reported on further within the principle 'Deliver the whole, not the bits', however, it is relevant to note here the connection of these strategies with this principle.

ACCESS, ENGAGEMENT, AGENCY AND FAMILY

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, clear themes emerged in relation to the principle of 'starting early'. The strongest themes to emerge included:

1. Access to and engagement in early learning and health promotion (western and cultural).
2. Children being and connecting with family.

From here, this section is broken up into these two themes, demonstrating areas where Children's Ground has been effective and a section that identifies areas for ongoing development and improvement.

Theme 1: Access to and engagement in early learning and health promotion

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members reported increased access to western and cultural learning through Children's Ground, referring to children and families engaging in early learning rather than just being at home. They referred to accessing and engaging in cultural learning, and in learning environments that suited their children (on country), which links closely with Children's Ground's principle of 'Culturally safe', reported further on in this process evaluation section.

"There are also more people doing the [early learning] sessions, that never happened before."

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I saw that it was really good. 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. So, the kids was really happy at the outdoor playing."

35-45 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

"It's really different. We never learned culture when I was working at the schools."

50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"So, we can teach our kids our way of country and how to live on country and how they fit in."

40-50 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

First Nations staff/family members regularly referred to increased access to health promotion and health information, reporting that children were learning about their own health through increased and active engagement in health promotion.

People reported children were learning healthy routines (such as teeth cleaning, nose blowing and face washing), increasing their knowledge about healthy food/drink choices and having the opportunity to be actively involved in preparing healthy meals. People also reported that children's health knowledge was building from their earliest years, particularly in relation to health behaviours that are preventative.

"...like teaching them how to wash their hands before they have their lunch and teach them how to look after their bodies, like cleaning their face, blowing their nose so they don't get infections in their ears, learning them early. And taking them on country because good thing for them, learning them on their culture, learning them their own language, like they can speak their language really strong. And western and First Nations."

**45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We're teaching them about eating the healthy food... No cool drink, no lollies, no chips, like that."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Yeah, we're integrating health into everyday life, like taking children out and teaching them how to cook, kangaroo tails maybe. And the whole family's involved with that."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

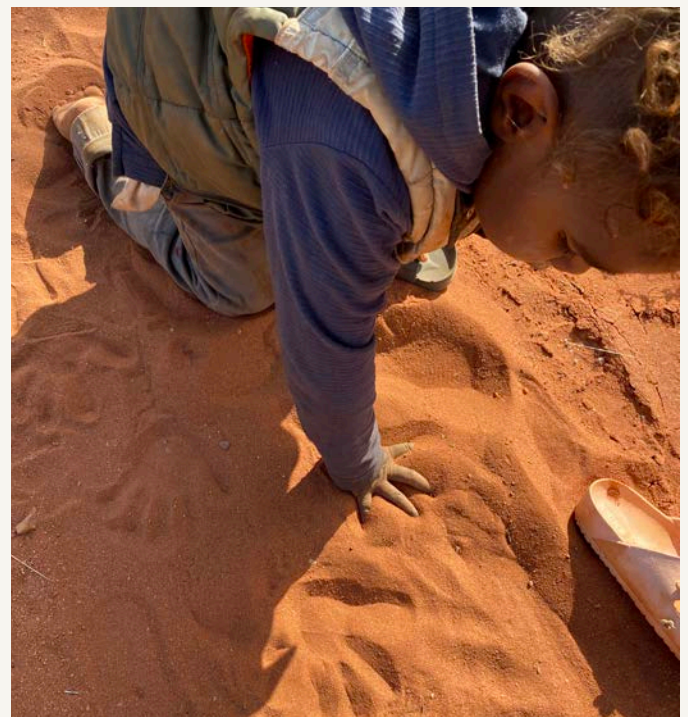
"I just know that they're learning about keeping their skin clean from getting sores and more learning about healthy food, eating healthy food, keeping their body healthy and from the chronic disease... so they don't get sick."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"They're doing bush medicines, smoking babies, smoking young mums, and cleaning their sores with that same bush medicine. Cleaning our spirit."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

This principle of 'Start early' has sought to develop the early building blocks of lifelong learning and wellbeing through health literacy, agency and healthy behaviours for children. The whole-of-family engagement in learning and health promotion is contributing to people of all ages within families also building the health literacy and knowledge required to support children's health, learning and wellbeing in home and community environments.



Theme 2: Children being and connecting with family

First Nations staff/family members reported children engaging in early learning strengthened connections with their immediate and extended family. This was both a driver of engagement and a benefit for children, enabling children to feel comfortable and safe within Children's Ground's early learning sessions.

Staff/family members reported this also contributed to their cultural learning by connecting with other families and together learning about their cultural relationships, connections and responsibilities through their kinship system.

"They [Children's Ground] let the family come along, join the crew. And let the children walk along the path beside their parents. Because you can't have mother going every day to the school."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"It was good, coming to Children's Ground, meeting up with other kids. They feel excited, we all do."

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"Yeah, and kids knowing each other, like you know, which families, which they're starting to recognise. Kids who were kept at home wouldn't know who was who."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Bringing children and families together from different family groups within early learning delivery and through community events and celebrations has been a deliberate strategy by First Nations governance.

This seeks to strengthen cultural and family relations building positive relationships from children's earliest years. This builds on connections between communities, with a focus on young children as well as whole families.

Over the long-term, the intent is that this will contribute to safe and inclusive community environments and social and cultural capital and connectedness.

Areas for ongoing development

Areas for improvement and ongoing development within early learning and wellbeing delivery were also reported by staff/family members. These include improved time management in preparing the early learning delivery and starting sessions earlier, supporting more Elders to attend Learning on Country (which can be challenging due to dialysis and health issues) and improved planning and ensuring plans are being followed – which was also reported on previously in principle 'Child, family & community-led'.

It was also reported that Children's Ground needs to continue working to engage more children and families in learning. This is also reported further on under Children's Ground's principle of 'A critical mass'.

"More parents need to come with their kids. They, their kids can learn, you know, with parents to teach them... you know, kids need to learn."

25-35 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I think need more Elders to go on – and I think they go on the sessions and they need to teach their kids more in their language, talking in their language."

45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“You can see that people want to get better at time. They want to start our sessions earlier because they’re wasting too much time running around doing things here.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Many of the challenges and improvements reported by staff and family members are impacted by not being fully place-based and due to limited resources. However, time management can be improved within current resources.

SUMMARY

Evaluation data demonstrates that Children’s Ground worked effectively to ‘Start early’, evidenced by increased access through delivery of early learning and health promotion with young children aged 0-5 years and their family, and as reported by staff/family members. This was achieved in the context of consistent disruptions to delivery (COVID-19 and persistent sorry business).

The process of integrating health promotion and prevention into all formal and extended hours early learning sessions has been evidenced as effective in engaging children and families, with children building health literacy and behaviours from their earliest years. This is significant given the impact that ill-health can have on children’s development and early and lifelong learning.

While the data shows that Children’s Ground increased early learning delivery with integrated health promotion from the previous evaluation period, more work and resources are required to continue increasing access through increased delivery days and engagement – with staff/families stating the need to engage more children and families.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

**AKWEKE ANTHURRE MAPENGE
URRKE ARNE MPWAREMELE
URRKAPETYEKE**
(START EARLY WITH THE
LITTLE ONES)

This is something that's never really been around before. People have had early learning places around but there hasn't been anywhere our families could fit, where they could see a fit – it was always still in those western structures. Even some Aboriginal services, they are still western services. So, to have something that they have full ownership over, in a way that fully does it our way and has that space for people.

People can come here even with newborns – they are not waiting on a list until kids are four or five when so much learning can be happening before then. Even pregnant mums come and so then they feel better prepared for what they want for their kids because they have been exposed to Children's Ground. Here we are growing with the kids and families, even before the kids are born, so kids are born into it, born into this way of learning, being and doing.

Even those really little ones are learning on country from when they sit up, they are holding bush foods, they are seeing the kinship and responsibilities with people of all ages. And those young mums and pregnant women – they are learning how to keep themselves safe while they are pregnant. Same as children learning to be around Elders that intergenerational learning in this setting, kids are learning off each other. The older little ones in the group are learning their roles as teachers of the little ones. They are learning how to behave and interact and learning about the kinship system through that little newborn being there. They are learning from their parents and grandparents and that newborn all in one session.



It's always that continuous learning and teaching. Some early learning services encourage parents to stay but not their other older kids, so that's hard for parents – but at Children's Ground the family is there together. And now kids are being born into this and it's a new normal and they shouldn't expect any less. Kids should be born into this normal.

There are a lot of [early childhood education] services, but they are not always in the ways that family needs it to be. Like you miss two days or whatever and they want to give your spot away. Then families don't feel like they matter. And those services are rushing kids out the door and off to school. Whereas here we go at the child's pace. Families have the option of sending the kids to school, but we are not rushing them out the door. And the families feel like this is not just any organisation. They feel that we do respect and value each family and child.

Families are talking about all kids learning all these healthy learning habits, like identifying sores, keeping clean, having good nutrition which is important. Because not doing these is normal – so for the kids to start understanding and getting that education through Children's Ground – they are learning that why we have chronic illness and diabetes, and stuff is because of lifestyle and diet.

And these kids are learning that all the chronic illness is not normal.

But kids grow up seeing what others in the family are doing and it's that continuous cycle because no one in that family is mentioning that this is not good and saying that we shouldn't be having so much of this or that [unhealthy foods]. But the people in Children's Ground are learning all of these things – that there are foods and drinks that are not healthy for children and the family themselves.

Because all the families live together in the house or as neighbours all the kids grow up together. And how can I say no to my kid having Coke when 17 others are running around with Coke. It's trying to reach that critical mass, so that it is normal – then one day it might be that 17 say no to Coke but one. It's hard to change your environment if it's just you trying. For change to happen it has to be with the kids, but across all the families.

It's a slow process because no one is going to give up Coke or their little favourite foods overnight. It's a slow process of constantly talking to people. It's about engaging families. It's about how you get them involved enough where they are learning and they want that change to happen. And it's about planting that seed and keeping on talking, but not in a superior way or by sending out a flyer. And it's about showing people about healthy food. And families are seeing and feeling the benefits of healthy food for themselves and their kids.

It's not all families, but there are some families where changes are happening. You hear people talk about it all the time – about kids not wanting to eat any butter but the healthy butter and parents saying their kids are asking for hummus and carrots. And you hear pride in the parents when they talk about it.

People talked about parents being there with the kids, but not just the parents, other family as well. And that people are being seen and working at CG. Back in the day everyone would have grown up knowing each other, you grew up with your Elders and families. But now it can be a bit more keep to yourself and your little family, whereas before it was all communal and so that cultural learning about kinship get taken.

Having that space at Children's Ground where the families are coming together in learning and working together, and everyone's invited – people are seeing who they are related to and kids are learning that too now. It's kind of a form of that old way of teaching kinship and systems and family – creating a more communal system. And Children's Ground gives that opportunity for all families to reconnect with other families that these days they might see in passing around town but wouldn't have sat down and had a good talk – so that's happening on learning sessions at Children's Ground. Families get that now.

You can hear in what people are saying that adults are encouraged to be involved [in early learning] which doesn't happen in other schools. Kids aren't dropped off here. There's no separation issues or trauma. But here the parents and family are here too in a way that nurtures that kid, and the kids feel safe because their family are safe, and they feel welcome there. And that's when kids start venturing out and exploring, at their own pace – when they feel safe enough to do so.

There's such a difference when the families are there. There's more pride, the kids are proud. Kids' attitudes are different when their family does come – they are more at peace and more confident because Mum's there or Dad's there or whatever. It makes kids and families culturally safe too to have families alongside the kids – especially going out bush on country and if you go to someone else's country.

A CRITICAL MASS (WORK WITH EVERYONE)

"Children's Ground is here for everyone."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

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 lead whole of community change – from a place of disadvantage to opportunity.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Children's Ground works with a critical mass of children and families – defined as at least 75% of the population.
- Children's Ground works with the broader community to see people of all ages experience wellbeing (physically, emotionally, culturally, economically and socially) over the long-term.

Engaging a critical mass is important to achieve sustained population or community level change. The hypothesis is that, if most children and their families in a community experience high quality opportunity in education, health, employment, governance and empowerment from birth, this will create generational change.

In practice, this principle is also about being inclusive and engaging with everyone to ensure that children and families do not fall through gaps in service systems.

Children's Ground works with each community to undertake internal community population mapping. From this, the service population is established with each community and combined as the regional population. In these early years of growth and development, the service population includes people living permanently in their community and people living in public housing in Alice Springs who are culturally connected through country and family. It also includes visiting family who may not be permanently living in the community, but who visit frequently or infrequently.

Population mapping enables Children's Ground and communities to understand the progress with growth and reach year-on-year and across evaluation periods. It also assists Children's Ground with understanding the high mobility of families across the region.

ENGAGING A CRITICAL MASS

Engaging a critical mass of children and their families is a key progress indicator that is monitored and tracked for engagement and evaluation purposes in each community and across the Children's Ground region.

See further information about community population mapping processes and challenges in Appendix 5: Data definitions, challenges and limitations.

Table 2 shows the percentage of children and adult family members engaged in the CG Approach from 2017 to 2022, from the four communities leading Children's Ground.

TABLE 2: CG APPROACH POPULATION REACH, 2017 TO 2022

Children and families by age group	Number engaged in CG	Total CG region population	% engaged in CG
Children 0-8 years	612	841	73%
Adults 18+ years (families)	792	990	80%

Note: Ongoing refinement of population data could have implications for the percentage of engagement reported. It is estimated that there is an undercount in the number of young people and adults living in each community, particularly those who are very mobile and do not engage with Children's Ground.

From 2017 to 2022, Children's Ground engaged with 78% of the population across all Children's Ground communities. This is a slight decrease from 81% in the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019).

This data shows that Children's Ground did not fully achieve engagement with a critical mass of children aged 0-8 years across the region, with a decrease from 89% in the first evaluation (2017 to 2019) period to 73% in this period. It should be noted that there has been a significant increase in the total Children's Ground population base since the first evaluation.

In raw numbers, Children's Ground increased reach and engagement across the region between the first and second evaluation periods. While engagement of a critical mass of children was not achieved, this and the first evaluation of Central Australia both evidenced that child and family engagement in early learning, health, employment, local governance and local decision-making increased dramatically since Children's Ground started.

The decreased engagement percentage is not significant and is likely due to a range of factors including family mobility, COVID-19 impact on delivery and engagement and the underlying population numbers increasing. In addition, population figures are not static due to extensive mobility and the need to continue enhancing population mapping processes.

When the full CG Approach is implemented, it is expected that each community will reach engagement of a critical mass over the first few years of delivery. This has not been the case throughout the implementation of the growth model.



WORKING WITH EVERYONE

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, people consistently reflected that Children's Ground made efforts to work with everyone with the resources available. However, they reported Children's Ground needed to continue engaging more children and families. There was a particular focus on engaging more young people in delivery, governance and employment.

In an anonymous survey, Children's Ground staff (n=18 First Nations staff and 17 non-First Nations) and local services (n=7) were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that 'Children's Ground actively works to support and know all the children and families in a community'.

- 97% of staff agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (59%).
- 100% of local services agreed (86%) or strongly agreed (14%).

In evaluation interviews of First Nations staff/family members, the strongest themes to emerge were:

1. Bringing families and communities together.
2. Family engaging family.

From here, this section is broken up into these two themes, demonstrating areas where Children's Ground has been effective and a section that identifies areas for ongoing development and improvement.

Theme 1: Bringing families and communities together

Staff and family members consistently referred to the importance and impact of Children's Ground working with children and families in a way that brings families and communities together. This was also evident in the principle 'Start early' reported on previously.

Some people referred to the importance of bringing families together 'as one' in ways that were not occurring before Children's Ground started. Others talked about how this enabled families to support each other and work together. This is consistent with First Nations ways of being that are intergenerational and collectivist; this is central to all delivery across the CG Approach.

"We work with everybody. Old, young, babies. We work with all the people in the community... We work with every community. Going out on country with everybody, going out to apmere, and we work together with everybody - the families."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"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

"It felt so right, bringing the children - all the children and family back together to one group."

50-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"Here at Children's Ground, how to work together, to be together, to remember and acknowledge together. So, we can go forward together with our women and children, for all us people to always come together as one."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Theme 2: Family engaging family

First Nations staff and family members reported the need and desire to continue engaging more children, young people and families. This was also a strong theme in the first evaluation (2017 to 2019).

Throughout this evaluation period, First Nations and non-First Nations staff undertook ongoing Walk & Talk (Community Engagement and Planning) with families who were not actively engaged or who had experienced family issues that impacted their engagement. They created or maintained connections and provided information about Children's Ground and/or what Children's Ground was doing within and outside their community. During this, staff also determined any supports that families may have needed to engage.

Walk & Talk was often undertaken by First Nations staff in their role at Children's Ground. For many, this was also a cultural responsibility that extended beyond work, with family engagement occurring outside of work hours when they saw families.

A compelling finding from evaluation interviews was the extent to which families engaged with Children's Ground through and because of family connections. The quotes below are examples that represent many descriptions of how and why families decided to engage with Children's Ground:

"Last year [my partner] started off [with CG] joining the band... and then we both came along, both went there. And then I sat in with [XXX] and [XXX] [two CG First Nations leaders]. They were doing their singing of words with their songs."

Just sat with them for the week and then... then two weeks after I was offered a job here, so we took the job and we've been here ever since then."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Because [XXX my sister] was saying, 'Come to Children's Ground, it's a good place to work, it's supportive. They will acknowledge your expertise, and things, rather than your qualifications.' But then it was like, Oh, but – because I haven't really worked... with families and stuff. You know how hard that might be, yeah, I just didn't know what to expect."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I was living with families. I had no home to go to, no work. I was just everywhere until I found my cousin [XXX]. Stayed with her for a couple of months and she took me on this session once with [XXX] mob and I was looking at the family and the kids, getting involved in them activities and stuff and with the food [nutrition]. I helped out there, even though I wasn't working, but I was helping out and then I got involved with a job at Children's Ground."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"My mob, family is working here. So made me think, I'd like to join in all this lot."

**18-28 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“How I first got told about Children’s Ground, just family just told us about it, family told us we’re doing this for the children. And then they asked if I could be a part of it. I came as a family member and did some volunteer work, like doing the yards, driving and whatever just needed to be done... that’s when [XXX] came and offered the job, like saying, ‘Do you want to work?’ I’m like ‘Go on’.”

**65+ YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Areas for ongoing development

Many First Nations staff/family members talked about the need for Children’s Ground to engage more young people and men. Engaging young people was a theme that also emerged from interviews in the first evaluation (2017 to 2019). However, it was more prevalent in this evaluation.

“We need to get our teenagers back... to get them involved, we have to offer them some kind of job, get them some kind of job so they can be a part of this and carry it on... I want to see more men walking with their children. I want to see more men stepping up to do their roles. I want to see more men being their leader now and talking up.”

**35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Need more young fellas and young girls, you know, to join up in this Children’s Ground a lot because they’ve got nothing to do at home and they just – you know? By supporting them and go talking to them and see if we can put them in there.”

**45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“I think they’re missing a lot of people because we only have school for the little ones. And I always said that and there’s always a big gap for the teenagers. I have a lot of 16, 15-year-olds asking if there’s anything they can do. I have a lot of mothers asking me too. And their daughters are 16... Because they’re missing out. Yeah, we’ve concentrated on this mob [young children] but who do they [young people] have to look up to if we’re not looking after this group up here, the teenagers.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

While Children’s Ground has a deliberate principle of ‘Starting early’ with young children, the desire of First Nations staff and family members to actively engage young people in Children’s Ground from the beginning of delivery emerged as a priority for families in all communities leading the CG Approach.

The intergenerational nature of the CG Approach sees young people engaged through family and community events and at times in early learning and health with their family. However, this is not enough to actively engage and support young people. Financial resources do not enable more regular and deliberate engagement of young people – this is felt by many families.

SUMMARY

Across the full population, Children's Ground engaged with a critical mass (at least 75%) of people of all ages but did not reach engagement of a critical mass of children 0-8 years. However, this and the first evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe evidenced that child and family engagement in activities increased dramatically since Children's Ground started.

The regular staff/family references to needing to increase engagement of children, young people, men and families demonstrates the commitment of staff and family members to engage and work with everyone in their communities.

Current engagement focuses on 'Starting early' with young children (within a whole of family and community context), working towards

the next generation of young people living a different experience to the current generation. However, the staff/family voices demonstrate that families continue to worry for young people who have not had these opportunities.

Other sections of this report demonstrate that Children's Ground engaged with some young people through community events, camps, etc, but deliberate and extensive engagement and employment of young people was not possible within the resources of the growth model.

The full CG Approach includes Community Development positions for each community which were not in place during this period of evaluation. Furthermore, the absence of intergenerational centres in each community (reported further on in principle 'In community') continues to impact the ability to be place-based which is central to engaging a critical mass in each community.

While on track within the resources available, this principle has not yet been achieved to the extent intended as per the full CG Approach.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

TYERRTYE INKERRNEYEKENGE URRKAPETYEKE (WORK WITH EVERYONE)

We're working with all the families and trying to encourage as many families as we can. We are trying to build the families up, because people talk about the men and them not really feeling they have a role – engaging the men, engaging the young people – all of that is strengthening the families.

People talked about a lot of women leading here and needing more men to stand up and be here and have a presence here, because the women have been holding this. And that's the case in a lot of places. After the intervention (Northern Territory Emergency Response, 2007), a lot of men were feeling put down and not feeling like they could lead – they were feeling disempowered and they started to drop into the background. They weren't confident to lead anymore, especially around children.

A lot of families have been broken and the men's role in the family has been disrupted. It's not talking about the hierarchy of the men at the top – they have been dismembered from the family. And it's not that no one wants women talking up, but it's about men having a presence and taking back their roles in the family alongside the women. When we look at the truth telling, historically it's been the men taken out of the family and the women have had to hold those family spaces – and we need to bring the men back in, and not in just physical roles because they are men. We need to bring them in in ways that are best for them – so they can have pride in themselves and what they are doing again.



It's hard to engage young people because we start with the little ones. And we see some young people they want to come on early learning sessions but can't always. You can see they feel like they are left out and that they have missed out because they didn't have something like this when they were young. We have missed a lot of people because we have really only just started, so how do we play catch up.

We are always talking about how we can get more teenagers involved, more kids involved so they can feel a part of it. So, they can want better and do better and be alongside all the role models that are here. Because they can't go anywhere else and find role models that they can relate to.

Their role models are the ones in their families that matter to them. When they see their families working at Children's Ground, they say, 'that's my Dad' or 'that's my Mum' and they don't have academics (a western qualification).

We've grown so big that we are stretched in the cars and pick-ups we can do. But we could be reaching so many more if we had the vehicles. We have grown but we can't keep up with all the people who want to come and want to work. We want to reach a critical mass but we are not ready for it financially.

There are more people that want to come but logistically we can't fit them all in. We are restricted by funding. We can only deliver for the families we have now, but we could do more if there was more funding. But it's very limited at the moment. Because there's always other families asking to be part of this and who are asking for work and employment. If we had the full funding we need, we could work with the other families we could reach.

A lot of people talked about how they came to be here through family. Like talking about how they come in to check it out and hang around with family, to then going on sessions, to then getting a job with Children's Ground.

People started by coming with family and participating. They see what good it's doing for family being at Children's Ground and working here.

So, they come and see, and they can see, touch and feel it. They see what jobs their family are doing. On paper if you were to see a PD [position description] and it has all these things, you could think it's way beyond your ability or knowledge, but to see how those jobs play out and what it looks like – people get confidence from seeing, oh that's what it is.

People might have had all these things in their mind like you need academics, and you need good English – so, when families do come in and see it in action, they see what it looks like in real life, they have that confidence and courage to engage. And then when they start a job, they can get those trainings from within Children's Ground.

You can see a lot of staff promoting Children's Ground outside of work in their communities. They are always talking to families about coming in – reassuring people it's for everybody, just come in and sit down, come on session with us, come and see what we do – you can bring your whole family.

Families are living in the conditions they live in every day, and they still get up for work – because they have a purpose, and the kids see that. Then young people think well they can do it, I could too – I'm living in the same conditions as them.

We need to engage the young people because they are the role models for the little ones. But it's going to take generations you know.



**DELIVER
THE WHOLE
NOT THE
BITS**

“We’re right on because that’s one of the things I said to the government department. I said, ‘You guys all sit in silos and that’s the problem. You fail to recognise the interconnectedness on the ground.’ Health, housing, education, employment, empowerment are all interconnected. They’re all part and parcel to one thing which is that community life and we’ve [Children’s Ground] captured that really well.”

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

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

The principle of ‘Deliver the whole, not the bits’ refers to Children’s Ground’s integrated service platform, which is the most visible part of the CG Approach (i.e. daily services and activities). This principle looks at both what is delivered (five key areas of service delivery being learning, health, cultural, community and economic wellbeing and development) and whether this is delivered in an integrated way that places the child/family/community at the centre.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

Through internal integration and collaboration with local services:

- The service platform implemented as a holistic, integrated and effective suite of services, supports and opportunities.
- Collaboration between Children’s Ground and other local services.
- Ensure children and families are at the centre of all delivery, with staff responding to their individual needs and priorities.
- Deliver culturally-centred western and cultural services, supports and access.
- Reduce service system access barriers.

First Nations systems and practice integrate all elements of a person’s life from birth into old age – this is referred to as ‘Altyerre’ by Arrernte people in Central Australia. Comparatively, western systems often separate and silo the funding and delivery of services and supports⁵². This creates challenges and barriers to access that often result in inequitable access and engagement.

⁵² Productivity Commission. 2024. Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study report. Vol1. Canberra.

A key intent of the CG Approach is that the integrated service platform works in and with the local service system to achieve responsive and seamless service access for children and families to reduce barriers and improve experiences and outcomes.

Figure 16 depicts the integrated service platform outlining 'what' services are delivered.

FIGURE 16: CG APPROACH INTEGRATED SERVICE PLATFORM

25 year Learning, Wellbeing and Development					Integration and Delivery
Learning & Wellbeing 	Stage 1 Early childhood 0-8 year olds	Stage 2 Childhood 6-11 year olds	Stage 3 Young people 12-16 year olds	Stage 4 Emerging adults 17-24 year olds	
	• First Nations and western curriculum and pedagogy • Early childhood education and development • Integrating health and emotional literacy • Family engagement • On country and in centre	• First Nations and western curriculum and pedagogy with global skills and knowledge, creating engaged and successful learners	• First Nations, western and global skills and knowledge continued. • Transition to adulthood • Enterprise skills • Workforce ready	• Provide individual support and mentoring plans to assist transitions to work and further education	
	• Physical, emotional, social, cognitive, creative, academic, cultural, financial knowledge and skills • Individual learning and wellbeing plans • Out of hours education and extracurricular programs				
Family Health & Wellbeing 	• Health promotion – Promotion outreach and social determinants focus (integrated into programs as well as outreach) • Social and emotional wellbeing – Counselling, learning integration (addressing trauma and stress) • Child and maternal health – Support and education focused on maternal and child health, sexual health, nutrition, childhood emotional and cognitive development, parenting • Nutrition – Preparing and cooking breakfast, lunch and morning/afternoon tea for children • Environmental health – Supporting healthier and safer environments in which children live				
Community 	• Local Governance • Intergenerational community centre • Community Development – Community led design of activities strengthens and celebrates safety, family, culture and daily life and responds to community priorities/needs				
Culture 	• Culture, law, language and practice is promoted and revitalised in all CG activities with resources to strengthen and access cultural life				
Economy 	• Employment and training • Enterprise • Financial and consumer literacy				
Coordination 	• Internal and external service coordination – formal agreements, partner delivery, collective impact, facilitation of access to other services				

This section of the report evaluates the extent to which:

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

DELIVERY OF CHILDREN'S GROUND'S INTEGRATED SERVICE PLATFORM

Section 'Growing Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe in Central Australia' presented the extent to which the integrated service platform is being delivered in the context of the full CG Approach as Children's Ground grows to full implementation. During this evaluation period, each area of the service platform evolved, however, some areas such as community development and wellbeing, did not progress as far as others (as reported in Figure 9: Operational growth by CG Approach platform area, by year).

Integration across Children's Ground's integrated service platform

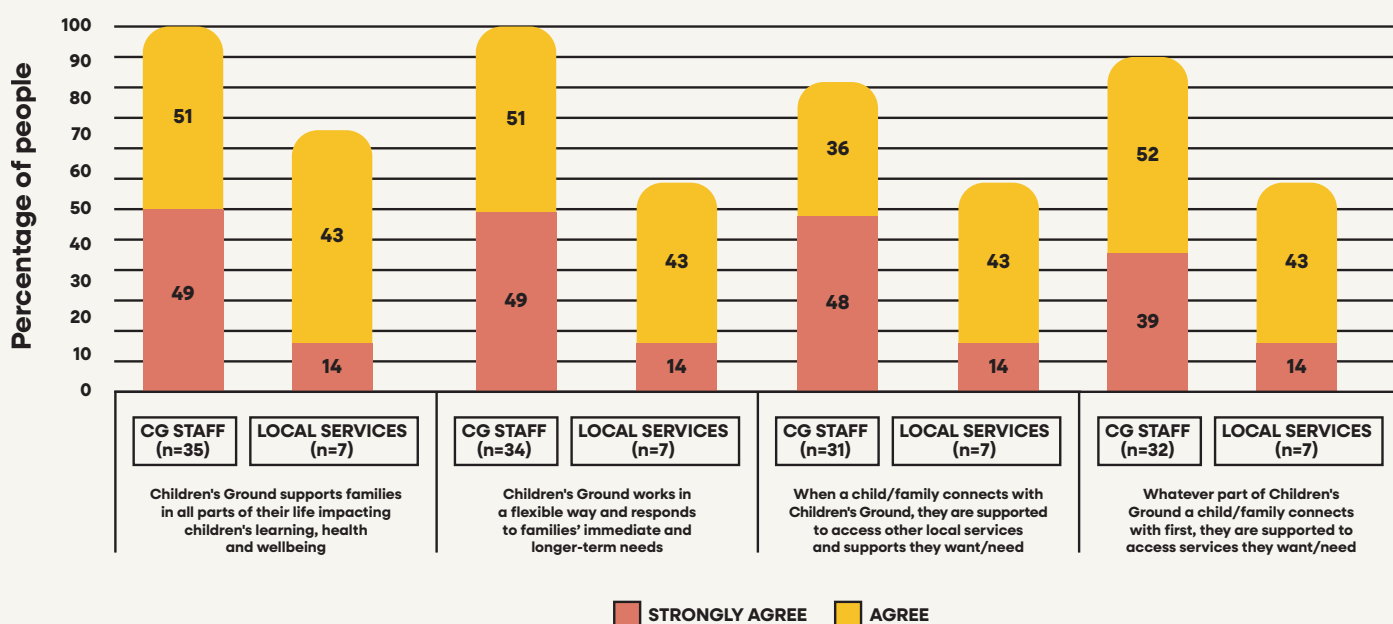
As detailed in Appendix 2, internal service integration occurred in multiple ways throughout the evaluation period: health and employment integrated into early learning, nutrition integrated across all delivery and

employment, first language and cultural knowledge and practices integrated across the CG Approach and social/emotional wellbeing integrated into learning, health and employment.

To evaluate the extent and processes of integration and if Children's Ground 'delivers the whole not the bits', Children's Ground staff (n=18 First Nations staff and 17 non-First Nations) were asked a series of questions (via an anonymous survey) to capture ways of working and frequency of connections with other service areas across the integrated service platform. Overall, 69% of staff (n=33) agreed (29%) or strongly agreed (40%) that 'Collaboration and planning across all Children's Ground teams happens regularly'.

Staff and local services were also asked to respond to statements about the extent to which Children's Ground 'delivers the whole and not the bits'. Graph 3 presents the perspectives of both staff and local services.

GRAPH 3: EXTENT TO WHICH CHILDREN'S GROUND IS DELIVERING THE WHOLE NOT THE BITS

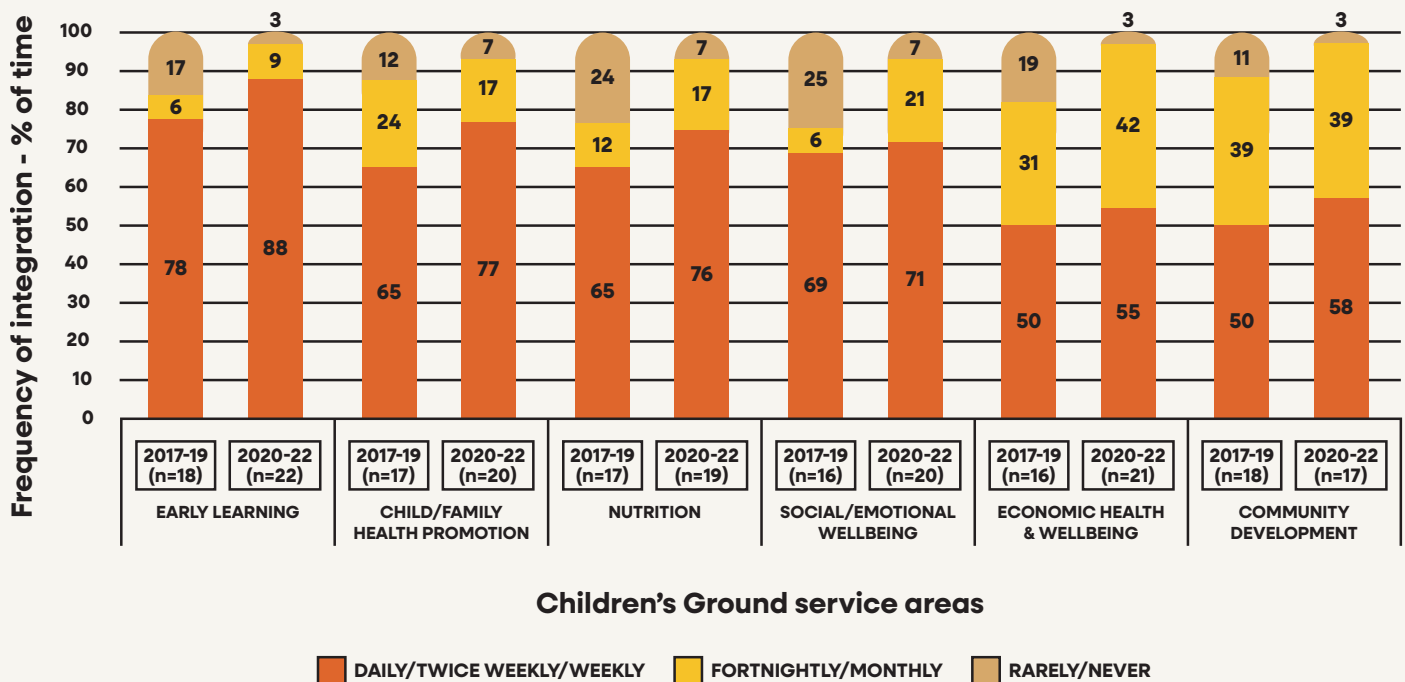


This data shows that a significant majority of staff believe that, throughout this evaluation period, Children's Ground provided flexible and responsive support for children and families in ways that meet multiple needs and priorities. It also demonstrates that Children's Ground is working well in terms of supporting families to access the services they need internally or with external local services. However, there is room for improvement in this area.

This data also demonstrates that the majority of local services interviewed also believe Children's Ground is achieving in this area.

However, based on the diverse nature of collaboration with local services (education, health, arts, language, enterprise projects), some did not know enough about Children's Ground's daily delivery and responded, 'don't know'. Following this, Children's Ground staff were asked: 'How often they connect with staff in each service area within the CG Approach, specifically about a child or family'. Graph 4 shows the reported frequency with which staff connected with key service areas across the CG Approach. This graph includes the corresponding data from the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019) as a comparison.

GRAPH 4: FREQUENCY OF CONNECTIONS BETWEEN STAFF ABOUT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ACROSS CG APPROACH SERVICE AREAS



This data demonstrates that, between the two evaluation periods, the frequency of daily/weekly occasions of staff connecting with each other about children and families (internal service integration) increased in key service areas of early learning, nutrition and child/family health promotion. There were also slight increases in daily/weekly integration with social/emotional wellbeing, economic health

and wellbeing and community development. There was an increase in fortnightly/monthly integration with social/emotional wellbeing and a decrease in rarely/never in this area.

There was a slight decrease in daily/weekly integration with maternal and child health and enterprise work.

There was an increase in fortnightly/monthly integration with enterprise work and a decrease in rarely/never in this area.

Some of the changes could be due to natural variations, however, overall, this data demonstrates that Children's Ground continued to grow integration across the CG Approach between the two evaluation periods.

As a result of integrated service delivery, staff were asked about the impact for children and families of Children's Ground staff working closely across teams (n=35):

- 71% of staff reported it helped better respond to child and family needs.
- 60% reported it led to earlier identification of child and family needs.
- 74% reported it increased their ability to reach and engage with children and families.

This data demonstrates that improvements in integrated practice are required to increase opportunities for earlier identification of child and family needs.

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members, people reported that Children's Ground made progress and was effective in working in line with the principle of 'Deliver the whole not the bits'. People referred to Children's Ground's ability to focus on the whole person, not just responding to single issues or needs, and working with the whole family – people referred to the importance of these to support whole families and households holistically: which can also translate into home and community environments.

“Yes, because we are there for the families and the kids, so how we do things is about giving them what they need, not telling them what they need... I think we're a bit more flexible too. Whereas other organisations they have their restrictions, they can only do so much, they can only focus on the health and then nothing else.”

But you're not fixing the health if you're not looking at their home situation, their community. You might fix this one thing, but something's going to come up next week because you haven't helped with all this other stuff... Whereas Children's Ground covers all of that.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Yeah, I think Children's Ground does that well. Like we've got a health area, the learning, the nutrition program, the many areas of health, the enterprise, community development, I think we're doing well and we're probably getting bigger.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

The full Children's Ground integrated platform is not yet being implemented, however internal integration is occurring with services being delivered by centring children and families. While there are areas for improvement, the evidence indicates a maturing of systems and processes that facilitate integration.



COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL SERVICES

Children's Ground seeks to work collaboratively in and with the existing service system in each region to enable holistic, seamless and timely service access for children and families. As detailed in Appendix 2, Children's Ground collaborated with a wide range of local services including: clinical health, allied health, audiology, dental, education, housing, financial and language, arts and enterprise-based collaborations, as well as engaging in interagency community level partnerships.

Between the two evaluation periods, Children's Ground's engagement with local services and organisations increased, with existing service partnerships strengthened and new partnerships developed.

Local services were invited to participate in an evaluation interview and to complete an anonymous survey about how they and their service/organisation worked with Children's Ground. As noted in the Method section, the small sample size (n=7) and diverse range of services who participated means there are no significant findings from quantitative survey data. We have presented some of this data throughout the report, however, data from these surveys has not been extensively included here as an evidence base.

Qualitative information from evaluation interviews with six local services has been used in this section and throughout the report because clear themes emerged from the people interviewed.

In evaluation interviews with local services and partners, findings defined the following key themes:

1. Relationships, trust and shared values enable collaboration.
2. Families and services benefited from collaboration.
3. Challenges of collaboration.

From here, this section is broken up into these three themes, demonstrating where delivery has been effective and areas for improvement.

Theme 1: Relationships, trust and shared values enable collaboration

Local services reported that relationships between staff was a key enabler for collaboration. One service provider also noted the importance of long-standing relationships and the longevity of staff in each organisation as an important enabler for continuity of collaboration and partnership work. This was also reportedly the foundation for building trust and confidence in collaboration. Having shared values and vision was also reported by local services as an enabler for working relationships.

"Trust, because there needs to be a trust in this type of relationship, that's been critical. Working with the Children's Ground staff and board [Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme] has been great... From an execution point of view, I've got confidence in the fact that we could put a plan together and things are gonna get seen through. It gives me a lot of confidence and stable footing to be innovative around the projects which come next."

"There are enough people in the leadership from us and them and others that are prepared to push the limits of the system and go above and beyond some of the ridiculousness and find the ways we can bend and shift and shape to make it work – it's the common vision of what's the best in the interests of children and families, rather than what's my work, you know, remit. I think Children's Ground's bloody persistence of just simply existing and not going away."

LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS, 2023 & 2024

Theme 2: Families and services benefited from collaborations

Local services reported benefits for families and for their services as a result of collaboration with Children's Ground.

Local services also reported increased safety and support for families and that families were pleased with the organisations supporting them working together. They reported that working with Children's Ground enabled services to put children and families at the centre of service delivery, and that their services were supported to engage families in environments they were comfortable in. Local services also reported that working with Children's Ground enabled their service to work differently with children and families.

"Collaborating with Children's Ground led to positive outcomes for families and for kids in really practical and meaningful ways. Just seeing families feel really supported in really scary situations, you know, having the backing of this organisation that they feel really supported and protected by... Having that [meeting] at Children's Ground and so that the family being able to participate in that process at a place where they felt safe with workers who they knew were going to advocate for them, share their perspective, understand their history."

"Our experience [of working with Children's Ground] was really collaborative and positive. Sometimes working with NGOs there can be this thing where it's like both parties are feeling protective of the family or something, and they're forgetting to work together for the family."

"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... You know that the little people are engaging in early education that are really culturally appropriate. 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 – and child-focused as well, child and family focused."

"In terms of our service's delivery, I think it had a positive impact just in terms of access to family, access to history and to the story, access to trust. Having Children's Ground workers sort of vouch for us and our service and helping us build a relationship."

"From the get-go you know it's much more powerful and real genuine community-led work that Children's Ground does and the cultural authority that comes with that way of working. So, for me it was always a model or an example that I always looked to... then in some respects try to use what I was learning in the way that I could in a government model."

"They [Children's Ground] have always been an example for us in terms of the way early learning could look in terms of on-country, working with families in a different sort of way."

We're now finding ways to be able to pay people for cultural knowledge and respecting that level of qualification. These are all influences from what we've learned from Children's Ground."

"It becomes more about the commerce than it does about the people within some agencies. So, I don't ever get that feeling from Children's Ground. I get the feeling that Children's Ground will try really hard to problem solve, to get the service to the people. It's the clients, it's the children and the families that are the focus, not the organisation themselves."

LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS, 2023 & 2024



Theme 3: Challenges of collaboration

Local services and partners were asked if there was anything challenging working with Children's Ground. Services reported time and workloads of staff in their service and in Children's Ground as hindering collaborations. Most services also referred to not knowing enough about what Children's Ground does and how they work with children and families. Some services talked about working closely with Children's Ground for periods of time, but collaborations ending due to staff turnover in both services.

Some services referred to the historical 'local politics' that have existed between Aboriginal services for many years and continue to be a barrier to meaningful and embedded collaborations that put children and families at the centre.

One service noted that, because Children's Ground doesn't work across all town camps and Alice Springs community, some children and families don't have access to it.

"In our service there's probably still not a really good understanding of what services are at Children's Ground [and their teams]... what their role is, what they can, what we can collaborate on and what not."

"I'm sure we could do a lot more together but without us sitting down with an MoU figuring out how we can help each other you know I think that that's been a hindrance. We haven't been able to fully support Children's Ground because we don't fully understand their range of programmes."



“Local Aboriginal service politics make it [collaboration] hard sometimes. Not between us and Children’s Ground, but from others.”

“Children’s Ground can be the answer, but there’s a lot of people and kids and families that don’t have access to it [those living outside the Children’s Ground communities]. I think there’s no intention to be exclusive, but it can feel like that.”

“There’s just the element of capacity and sometimes I think the communication between the two organisations can be a little bit tricky, but not in any big way. And it’s only because everybody’s flat out.”

“It’s like maybe our services have drifted from each other a bit, which is just like missed opportunities maybe, but that’s not on Children’s Ground, that’s us as well. We also have a responsibility to engage with our other services and community.”

LOCAL SERVICES PROVIDERS, 2023 & 2024

The reported challenges with collaboration with services were cumulative. The lack of knowledge about Children’s Ground and staff turnover (their service and Children’s Ground) reduced the ability to build relationships and a shared understanding between services and can hinder collaborations. While some relationships are robust, other remain informal and ad hoc. Formalised agreements for service partnerships may assist.

SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground is delivering a holistic wrap around service system that places children and families in the centre. Increased delivery occurred across all five of the key service areas.

Data demonstrates here, and in other principles, that Children's Ground has effectively delivered and integrated both cultural and western services across the CG Approach to create a system that centres children and their families. Children's Ground maintained internal service integration between the two evaluation periods and increased and improved integration in key areas of learning, health and social/emotional wellbeing. In some key areas (i.e. employment support), where staffing resources remained limited in this evaluation period, integration did not increase.

It is positive that staff reported that service integration resulted in increased reach of and responsiveness to children and families. However, some staff reports suggest that this is not yet translating into the extensive earlier identification of child and family needs as intended.

Data demonstrates that Children's Ground is reducing some service access barriers for children and families.

The extent to which this responded to social, structural, cultural and economic factors influencing health and wellbeing are evidenced further in child, family and community outcomes sections.

Children's Ground's collaboration with local services increased and strengthened throughout this evaluation period. Data demonstrates that some local service collaborations benefited children and families, as well as local services. However, it also demonstrates that service collaborations are driven by relationships between practitioners and not yet embedded as systemic practice. These challenges are consistent with challenges identified by Children's Ground staff and local services in the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019).

Collectively, service integration and collaboration across the CG Approach demonstrates Children's Ground is establishing a new service system and that children and families are being supported with some social, cultural and economic determinants of health and wellbeing. However, increased resources are required to continue improving internal integration and collaboration with and across the local service systems to ensure children and families can experience a seamless service delivery that can respond to all their needs.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

**ARNE INKERRENYEKE
ANYENTELHE ILETYEKE:
TYERRETYE NGWENHE MWERRE
ANETYEKE, AKALTYE IRREMELE,
TYERRTYE NGWENGE
ARTWEYE MAPENGE
(CONNECT EVERYTHING:
LEARNING, HEALTH, CULTURE,
WORK)**

WITHIN CHILDREN'S GROUND

People talked that Children's Ground does things holistically not in silos. Because they are taking care of every part of people and family life. From children to families being employed, they have health and community development in communities and having enterprise opportunities.

Everything is integrated and we say that all the time and people know that all the time. People don't feel safe if you are only working with them or talking to them about this one thing. It needs to be the whole package of people's wellbeing in that everything has to be good. Nutrition and all this is important because it leads on to kids going to school every day because they're not sick – and no one else does that, they're not trying to understand that whole child or that family better.

Each child needs education and wellbeing, but we also look at the whole family. We make sure the family is taken care of so that child can get everything the child needs and then that child thrives.



Families can see all the moving parts, all the bits that Children's Ground does that helps families. This is something that families would never have had before Children's Ground. To now have something like this where they can see what something like this looks like. Some families talk about all the different places you need to go to get different support with housing or health – but Children's Ground is all in one place – and they can see it.

People are seeing family access the services at Children's Ground. They see 'so and so' over there talking with the counsellor or the nutrition person. It gives them more confidence to access it themselves. We also see our mob in each team at Children's Ground, so people aren't walking into a foreign setting or clinic – they are seeing real people in the jobs, and these are real jobs. And families know when they come to Children's Ground, they can get access to what they need.

Before Children's Ground they wouldn't have known what an integrated model or organisation would have looked like, but they 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 – that's how people lived – in an integrated system.

Families talked about getting help with other services too. They might be able to access and get support from other services, but they might not have the confidence.

Some people come through Children's Ground [to access other services] because we have language speakers and that can make it easier to understand other services. So, they come to Children's Ground, and we hook them up with other services and it's not as scary. Then they can go off and do it themselves. They just need that connection from a place they feel safe with.

Children's Ground actually listens to our needs, they listen to people on the ground who have had problems accessing services and clinics or going to housing or the bank. They listen and support. Having some services coming into CG helps people with access and having health and learning and other supports here too. When people are in here working and being at Children's Ground, they start to see the things they can get support with and how the systems work – because they are getting that education from all these service areas they are a part of. And they are getting that knowledge informally and from people who know how to get access to services, whether it be housing or finances. For some people there can be shame if they don't think they know how to speak when they go into services, because they have to speak in English. At Children's Ground it's different, there are people there that can help them with accessing services, and with their consent can speak on their behalf. And that's one of the biggest things, families trust the staff at CG to talk about their issues.

WORKING WITH OTHER LOCAL SERVICES

It's good to hear from the services outside of Children's Ground, that people recognise we are pushing boundaries and working to put kids and families in the front. It's a good acknowledgement. They are saying that Children's Ground is not doing it for themselves, they are doing it for the kids and families, that the kids and the families are first and foremost in what Children's Ground stands for.

They are speaking positively about Children's Ground, and that we're trying to change the system. They're saying we are from the people and what they want. People talked about having confidence that working with us means their projects and work are going through the right process. People can feel confident that our governance means we do everything properly, that it comes from our people, not someone else's agenda.

One service is saying that they feel confident and relieved when they know a family is working with Children's Ground, because they know the whole family is being taken care of – not just the child, the whole family, by getting support from Children's Ground.

Some services have said they have taken things they have learned from working with CG into their own service.

This person is saying that at Children's Ground First Nations people are valued for their cultural knowledge. They get paid for sharing their cultural knowledge. And they are talking about going back to their service and doing it that way themselves with people they connect with and employ.

This one is talking about how they feel like Children's Ground has their back and is vouching for them, and that they are more confident that they are doing things the right way working with us. It's almost like asking an Elder, because if anything happens, they know they did it the right way. Even though we are a new organisation compared to other organisations, we're doing it the right way.

People talking about it being hard to work together when everyone's so flat out. When time just gets away and you know you were supposed to do something, but you couldn't get to do it because something important came up that you had to be involved in. That just affects how everyone works at times.

Everyone here [Children's Ground] are pulled in so many directions.

And we have services come in and sometimes our people don't always have time to see them, and that's hard for them [the local service]. And that's because there is that lack of funding for us to employ more people to be a part of it.

If there was more funding, there would be more people employed to do the things that Children's Ground needs to do, to operate properly at its full capacity. You know we can only do so much with what we have.

And a lot of people [local services] don't fully understand the whole of Children's Ground. So, coming in [to CG], they might be coming in through social/emotional and not fully understanding the whole organisation, like why we might be seen as exclusive. People can say that there are other families that can benefit from CG, but we can't spread ourselves thin like that. We are trying to do well with the communities we are working with and already spread thin in some areas – we need to show to families we are here for the long-term, so they trust us as an organisation.





IN COMMUNITY (PLACE-BASED)

“We want to have our own community centre. And take our kids back to teach them in their community. The community needs people. The people need children to learn in the centre. We need that place so that we have our own space in educating our own children.”

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

The principle of ‘In community’ (place-based) intends to ensure that services are designed, governed and delivered in and with communities where people live, with health, education and employment being part of everyday community life. Rather than services being ‘delivered to’ people, or not being accessible outside of the community, delivery is in and with communities.

Children’s Ground’s intention is that, through place-based delivery in and with community, poorly resourced communities experiencing exclusion with limited access and outreach can shift to being well-resourced places where opportunity, inclusion and empowerment are commonplace. Over time, the investment builds upon the social, cultural and economic capital within families and whole communities.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Each community has an intergenerational hub of safety, learning, wellbeing, governance and employment in their community, run by their families.
- All delivery is place-based and intergenerational - delivering where children and families live.
- Inclusion, safety and building upon the social, cultural and economic capital of the whole community.

Throughout this evaluation period, Children’s Ground attempted to prioritise place-based delivery in communities. However, there are currently no purpose-built centres in the four communities for the delivery of services for children and families.

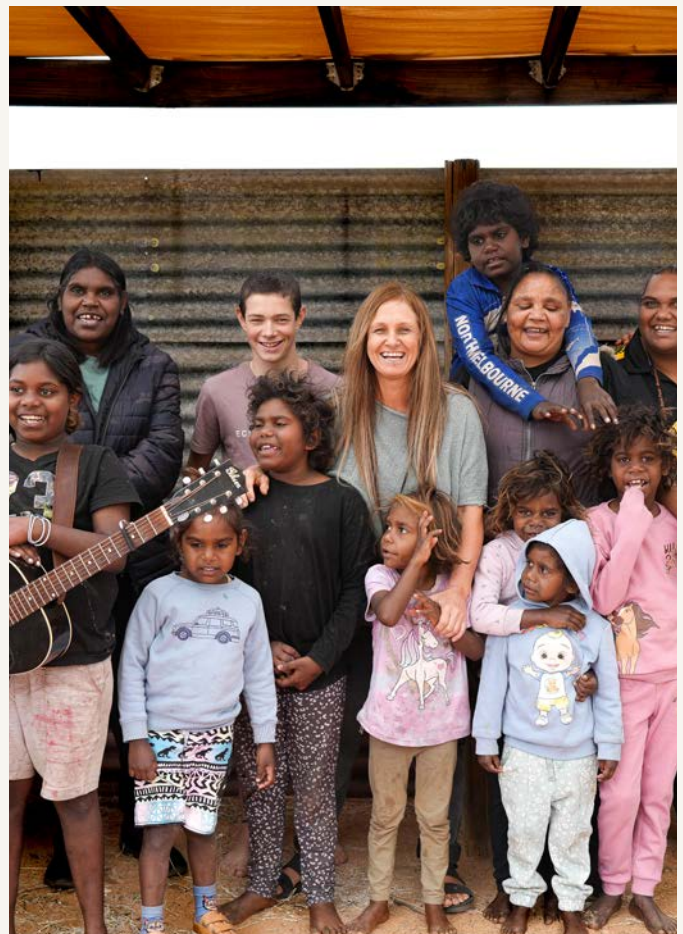
In three of four communities, Children’s Ground’s capacity to be permanently place-based and ‘in and with community’ remained limited.

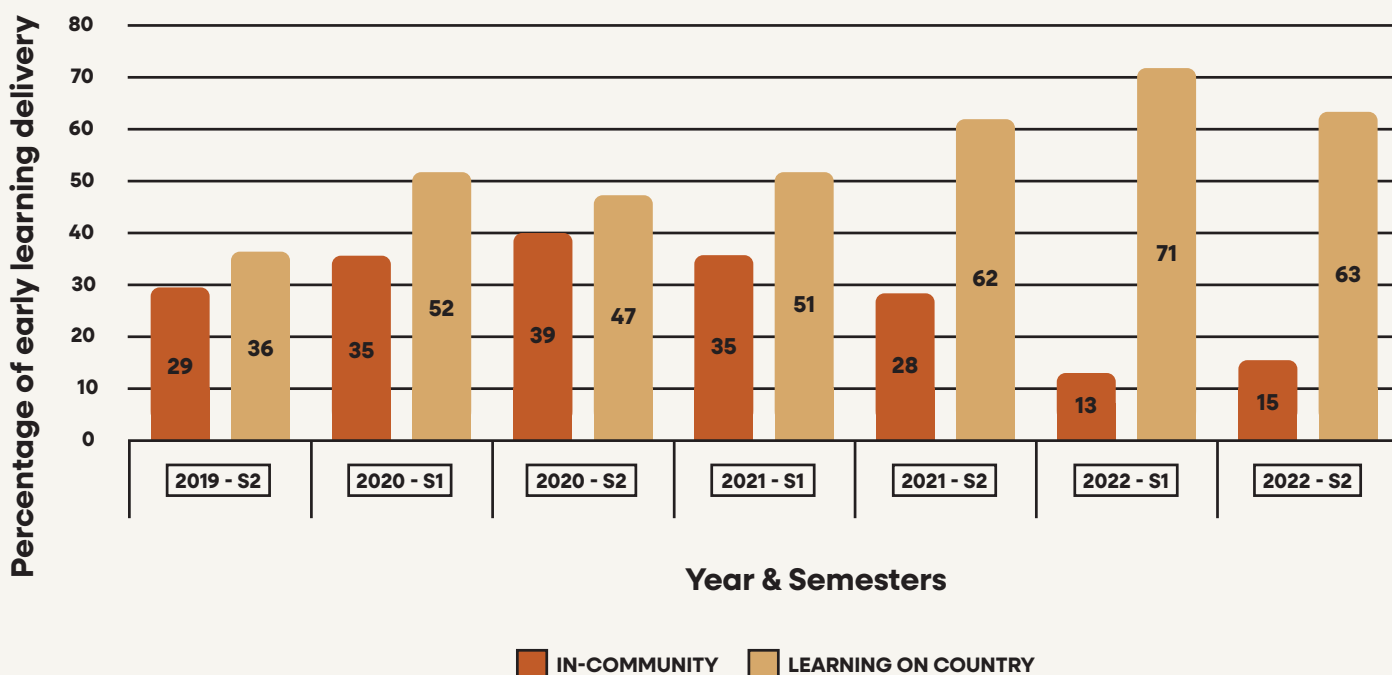
- In one community, where Traditional Owners live, this is expected to take some years due to long-term tenure challenges and lack of legal rights to establish housing, community infrastructure and basic essential services in their community. As part of community development, Children's Ground continues to support Traditional Owners to advocate and address their rights with government. In-community delivery was achieved to a limited degree with this community in areas of early childhood, health, community development and employment, albeit without infrastructure. See Appendix 6.
- In two communities, early years sessions were occurring in outside areas established by Children's Ground leaders for delivery at the beginning of the evaluation period. These spaces are within the boundary and connected to existing community centres (it should be noted that neither centre is purpose built for comprehensive place-based delivery). Limited access to space within the existing community centres in these two communities has impacted ability to integrate delivery of our other integrated service platform, including meeting places for community governance and planning, after hours activities, access to the kitchen to engage families in preparation for the delivery of nutrition and equipment storage. In-community delivery continued to occur in public spaces in the community and near people's houses as 'pop up' or family-based services.
- In the fourth community, some progress was made with place-based infrastructure. This saw the set up and refurbishment of a donga/ container in one homeland community. This new community space was used for delivery of learning, health and community governance, and as a gathering space for family nights and celebrations.

In addition, homeland infrastructure development by Ingkerreke Outstation Resource Centre established an outdoor community space and playground. This helped achieve the beginning of a long-standing vision of founding Elders to establish a school at Mpweringke Anapipe so children could access and engage in education on their homelands and country.

Place-based delivery did occur in the three communities experiencing challenges – with community leaders identifying areas within their communities to deliver sessions, including under trees, beside houses and under portable shade cloth structures. While this ensured that strategy, design and delivery were being led by each community and undertaken in their community, it was not possible to establish local intergenerational centres to achieve places of safety, learning and wellbeing within each community as is intended within the CG Approach.

Graph 5 shows the percentage of place-based early learning delivery in communities each year from 2019 (at the end of the first evaluation period) and throughout this second evaluation period up to 2022. Learning on Country is usually categorised as place-based delivery. However, it has been presented separately here to demonstrate the two elements of place-based delivery (in community and on country), and to show Children's Ground's limited progress with in-community delivery which is central to building social cultural and economic capital where people live.



GRAPH 5: PERCENTAGE OF PLACE-BASED, IN-COMMUNITY AND LEARNING ON COUNTRY DELIVERY BY SEMESTER, 2020 TO 2022

This data shows that the delivery of early learning in communities slightly increased and then decreased over the evaluation period. The decreases of both types of place-based delivery in 2021 and 2022 reflect the impact of COVID-19.

The reduction in place-based, in-community delivery in 2022 was the result of Children's Ground First Nations leaders and families being denied access to the existing community centres within two of their communities. This corresponds with an increase in delivery of Learning on Country, when in-community delivery was not possible and community leaders decided to instead deliver on-country learning, or on occasions in Alice Springs township or at the Children's Ground Hub.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members reflected on the challenges of in-community delivery:

"It's really hard for us because we tried and tried and tried, but it never happened. They just keep pushing us back."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"The hard thing is that we used to be in our own community centre where we went back to share the centre with the kids and our community, with Children's Ground. And today it's just broken... It just took so many things away from us, from our kids, what we shared in Children's Ground. We want to have our own community centre."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"...also the challenges we have with using spaces in community. Like the challenges you've got around access to space, like those limitations as well."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Despite the ongoing challenges of in-community delivery, in an anonymous survey completed by Children's Ground staff (n=18 First Nations staff and 17 non-First Nations), 95% of staff agreed (49%) or strongly agreed (46%) that 'Children's Ground is place-based, working in community where families live'. This is likely due to the innovative solutions community leaders and staff planned to enable place-based delivery to occur in community and on country.

Place-based delivery intends to see Children's Ground staff based in community working from local community centres. During the period, some delivery and all staff continued to be based at Children's Ground's central hub, with delivery remaining 'to communities' rather than being permanently 'In community' as per the intent of this principle and the CG Approach.

SUMMARY

Evaluation findings show that, after six years of operations, Children's Ground has made some progress with in-community delivery, however, it remains unable to achieve full and effective place-based delivery in and with communities as intended. Despite ongoing challenges, place-based delivery has occurred in each community through innovative community-led solutions whenever possible (weather and access dependant).

Positive progress was made with realising the vision of founding Elders for children to engage in learning through a 'school' on their homelands, with the establishment of infrastructure for learning and other activities.

Evidence demonstrates that the lack of high-quality community infrastructure (and access to existing community centres) compromised comprehensive service integration, access and equity, as well as opportunities for children, families and whole communities to come together in positive and social environments where people live. It also impacted the capacity for wide-spread child and family engagement and limited the potential for community employment, governance and self-determination.

This has short- and long-term impacts. In the short term, it is a barrier to engagement. Since the beginning of operations, demand for Children's Ground by community has continued to outweigh resources and capacity.



Not having a local centre means that Children's Ground has been unable to serve children and families who are wanting to engage and who would be able to engage if a centre was available in their community – which can then strengthen positive and safe family and community relationships and social capital within communities.

In the long-term, place-based delivery is central to building inclusion, safety and social, cultural and economic capital of the whole community. It is likely that over the medium and longer-term, the impact of Children's Ground not being place-based will become more visible and may limit outcomes in education, health, cultural, social and economic life at a community level.

FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

INGKERRENYEKE APMERENYE APURTE-IRREME APMERENGE (IN COMMUNITY – PLACE-BASED)

People are talking about building stronger families and communities and that will spill out into people's health, education and life. And building communities needs to happen in communities – but this has been hard with the issues with being able to deliver from the community centres, or in other places where we don't have a place or a building.

A lot of families talked about 'we need to bring in more kids and families'. It's about that working with everyone and that critical mass in communities. It's like if you are only one of twenty houses involved, how can we make those long-term changes with just one.

Everyone is invited, everyone has a role, everyone is valued, everyone brings something. We are strengthening the families within Children's Ground, then they go home, and they are talking to other families and that's when we are getting that critical mass.

But we need more families getting involved because they go out and do that Walk & Talk [family and community engagement] and then they bring in other families from all those houses, and then those families can bring in more families. We are doing this, but it's hard when we can't be in communities how we need to be, so other families can see Children's Ground and just wander over when they want and check it out. And when other families see it, they want to be part of it – and then it spreads.



It's not about just bringing family in for learning – it's that whole family, it's everyone in that household. We have family gatherings for funerals and that, but Children's Ground is a different setting, it's about celebrating people and families getting together at events and working together for the children. We have events for all families in Children's Ground and for each community, but we have to have them at Children's Ground or the Telegraph Station or out bush because there's no space we can use in the communities.

People talked about missing the community centre, because we did work from there for a while. They said they are happy to be able to deliver sessions at Children's Ground, but engagement is harder when we are not in community.

People talked about Children's Ground not just being 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 that's right, but Children's Ground is about community development too, about building up and strengthening families and all of the community. And for all language groups in our communities. And we need to engage more families from other language groups so we can build our communities.

Back in the day when we used to live community way, everyone looked out for each other, everyone supported each other, there was a whole support network. Because our old people had so much respect for each other that it spilled out though their kids and grandkids naturally. There was always people and the old people looking out for you, even if you didn't know it as kids. It was the whole community looking out for each child. It's that whole thing of it takes a village to raise a child, it really was that back in the day. Even somebody else's old people were looking out for you.

So, in the flow of the community in the old days there was order, there was respect and trust, sharing and giving – people were happy and things were done the right way. If someone mucked up, all the old people would get together and say why that was wrong. But now it's each to their own. The systems we used to have in place, the kinship systems, the respect, the trust was everything and it came from that kinship system.

But the way our old people and families lived and worked and played together has been broken by colonisation. So, when our kids aren't learning the connections and that kinship, some young people who are fighting these days, they don't know they are family, they don't know that kinship connection.

They don't know that maybe their grandparents were the best of friends. But through Children's Ground, this generation to come, people are raising their kids to know who they are and how they relate to one another. And to do that we need to be in communities, as well as on country.

There's nowhere else that works with the whole family in this way – with families leading and encouraging the whole family and where everyone in the family has a role and can be together and work as a family and a community and learn the kinship knowledge and system. Because everyone has a role in raising the child and educating the children. It's all part of kinship so you have to build everyone up.



**INNOVATION
- COMBINING
OLD AND
NEW**

**“It changed our life
teaching our little
ones our old ways,
old and new.”**

**20-30 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Each First Nations community has unique cultural, land, governance, language and kinship structures. This principle recognises the right of First Nations people to access cultural knowledge and practices as systems in their own right – not disrupted, but alongside western systems.

In design, strategy, delivery and evaluation, Children’s Ground seeks to bring together the oldest and most developed living culture with leading global western knowledge, practice and innovation. This is to respond to the local context, current global evidence and over 65,000 years of knowledge.

Therefore, the CG Approach was built on three underpinning knowledge systems and evidence bases, presented in priority order:

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

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Across the CG Approach, First Nations cultural knowledge and practices sit alongside western knowledge and practices – with First Nations language and cultural learning privileged.
- First Nations and non-First Nations staff working alongside each other to bring together the oldest knowledge and practice systems in the world with emerging leading practice and global innovation.

Throughout this evaluation period, Children's Ground continued to visibly embed first language, culture and governance across each area of the CG Approach, building on the progress made during the first evaluation period. Progress is evident in established, growing and maturing processes as follows:

- Elders continued to be the key authority centring First Nations systems of knowledge and practice and leading cultural knowledge transmission with next generation cultural leaders and authorities.
- Policy, governance and evaluation embedded in First Nations and western standards and processes.
- All staff continued to bring their respective cultural and western expertise to dual processes and systems, enabling a dynamic integration of 'old ways and new ways.' This increased between evaluation periods, particularly with an increase in the number of First Nations staff across health, management, enterprise, resource development and learning.
- Increased cultural and western learning, health and employment.
- Ongoing development of the Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye learning and curriculum framework aligning this to the national western early childhood learning framework.
- Finalised a Child Learning & Wellbeing tool that captures progress in children's cultural and western-based learning and wellbeing.
- Increased development of first language and culture learning resources, expanding to different learning platforms, i.e. books, apps, songs, etc.
- Increased use of digital technologies in learning, art, storytelling and resource development.
- Revitalisation of endangered languages through combining Elders knowledge and digital technologies.

These were enabled and supported through increased First Nations employment, strengthened and broader First Nations governance and ongoing funding for first language revitalisation and strengthening.

In anonymous surveys, staff (n=35) and local services (n=7) were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'Children's Ground always thinks about the old ways and new ways of doing things (First Nations & western)':

- 100% of staff agreed (34%) or strongly agreed (66%).
- 85% of local services agreed (71%) or strongly agreed (14%).

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members reported that Children's Ground was effective in implementing this principle, particularly in: Enabling new ways of teaching old ways; Enabling old ways and responding to how children are learning and engaging in life through technology.

"I think we're doing well. If you look at the songs and the things that come out of the enterprise, like the books and stuff, that's all new ways of old teaching, like writing books, writing children songs onto CDs and giving them out."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Always trying to find new ways to teach the kids as well in ways that are relevant for the kids now, like kids are more on iPads so that sometimes we might have to take stuff to the iPad, to be able to adapt to what's the trend or how kids are learning these days."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"That's always been our thing, for them to learn old ways in English and in Arrernte. Arrernte comes first, language comes first, then English later."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

One Elder reflected that:

"In the old days, people used to live in a good environment, good in everything. We used to have everything. But new ways now, everything's all gone, everything's been broken... Culture, language, identity, everything has just gone... we've got to be bringing it together, like the old way and the new ways... and keep it strong in Arrernte, strong in both."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



SUMMARY

Evaluation data demonstrates that Children's Ground was effective in integrating old systems of knowledge and practice with new knowledge and technologies to achieve a dynamic service system for children, families and communities.

Children's Ground centred First Nations knowledge and practice into a new approach that integrates this with western practice. This increased since the first evaluation period and occurred in the way services are delivered but was also embedded in policy, strategy, governance, workforce and evaluation.

Largely, this principle was implemented as intended. However, as resources continue to increase, there is room to continue enhancing our practice and innovation through ongoing development of 'new ways to teach old ways'.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

ARNE MPWARETYEKE ARRURLE
ARLE MPWAREWARRETYARTE
ANTE NTHAKENHE ARLE LYETE
ARNE MPWAREWARREME
ARTEKE

(ALWAYS THINK ABOUT
OLD WAYS AND NEW WAYS
OF DOING THINGS)

People are talking about enterprise, how they have books and songs, and sharing them with families. These are new ways for teaching language and culture and for teaching things like health.

Children's Ground is about people leading with their cultural knowledge, so they know what they are talking about. Because it's things that they know, it's things that they are living, and because we know what's best for our communities.

The younger ones [young adults and young people] have the Elders to learn from and look to when there is a decision to be made. We all have to go through Elders and the people that are older than us to learn, because this is the cultural way. The Elders direct you to the right things to do or the right person to talk to who has the knowledge.

We have the Elders for the language and culture and to speak about the decisions, but there's also people who might have the western ways too that can speak to support the Elders in the decision-making. They sit alongside the Elders to support. But culturally it's the Elders. There is safety in always going back to the



Elders. Even if we are confident in something, we check it with the Elders and leaders. It's like then someone has your back and someone else has approved it and it's okay. Responsibility is shared. And each group has their Elders.

The older people are learning from young people too. Young people know today's tech with phones and that, so they show old people how it works.

We are being able to adapt and make the most of what we have. Some things can't be the old traditional ways, but we're still going ahead with cultural learning and it's good.

And it's better than nothing. To be able to change and adapt to how it can be done now.

We are in this space where, like if it's learning, this space where sometimes things you would teach out bush can't always be done – like for some things you need to go right out bush. For some things it has to be new ways of teaching, and we need the space to think about how we can do that and what it can look like and what support we need to do it.

Sometimes that's hard for people to explain because it's a new thing, a new way that we haven't done before. There's no handbook about how we do it – and the same new ways won't work for everything. So, people need to figure out how they can do that and then try to explain what they want to do to non-First Nations staff. That can be hard sometimes.



**EXPECT &
DELIVER THE
BEST**

"We expect the best and we deliver the best, so our kids can know and see. So they can hear and know the language and do. That's delivering the best of the best."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

This principle sets the standard for excellence that all children and families deserve to enable long-term wellbeing. Since colonisation, First Nations people have been subjected to genocide and racist systems and policies that have resulted in entrenched structural exclusion, inequity and injustice.

Investment in communities has been historically poor. The state of housing, infrastructure and access to services that are considered standard services in the rest of Australia, are dramatically inferior or do not exist in communities. Systems complacency and embedded racism sustain mediocrity and injustice in service access and standards. In turn, this sustains intergenerational disadvantage. First Nations children, young people, adults and whole communities deserve and should expect the best of resources and standards for their children and families.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Ensure First Nations people have access to high-quality standards and delivery at all levels within services and systems, with adequate resources to embed excellence.
- Leading practice in cultural and western standards are embedded across the CG Approach systems, processes and services.

Operations and evaluation in all Children's Ground regions to date demonstrate the importance of excellence. Even with resources in place, it takes time to build and embed excellence.

Throughout this evaluation period, Children's Ground continued to review, adapt and change processes and systems to build towards excellence across all levels and delivery of the CG Approach.

This section outlines progress and effectiveness achieved in relation to expecting and delivering the best, and challenges experienced in key areas across the CG Approach and in organisational backbone support structures.

WORKING TOWARDS EXCELLENCE ACROSS THE CG APPROACH

Across the CG Approach, increases in staff and resource capacity improved service access, quality, governance, compliance and integration.

- **LEARNING & WELLBEING:** progress capacity in staffing to provide improved quality for each community. Articulation and implementation of the Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye learning and curriculum framework, with associated learning outcomes documentation has strengthened standards. Significant progress was also made with the *'The M.K. Turner Report: A plan for First Nations-led and designed education reform in Australia'*, outlining leading practice standards in First Nations education, which is the foundation for all Children's Ground learning delivery.
- **FAMILY HEALTH & WELLBEING:** access to health and wellbeing in community progressed with high-quality western and cultural practitioners continued. Children's Ground staff strengthened internal practice and external collaboration to respond to COVID-19 with high standards in prevention and promotion of health, safety and wellbeing. During the period, Children's Ground became certified as a registered food business, with training of health and nutrition staff in food handling, preparation, service, storage, safety and compliance requirements for maintaining this certification.
- **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & WELLBEING:** cultural and western-based roles continued to be remunerated equally at each level in-line with cultural and western standards and salary scales. Quality was supported by training and development for all staff in both cultural and western practice and policy. This was provided in accessible language and supported ways to maximise literacy, compliance and skills development. A new 'Women's Leadership and Development Program', supported women to reduce barriers to employment, leading to increased engagement in employment. In Enterprise development, standards for payment and recognition of First Nations contributors to book design, content and artwork, continued to be paid at a higher than industry standard.

- **CULTURAL & CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT & WELLBEING:** First Nations-only governance meetings supporting cultural integrity and standards. Supporting cultural practices and ceremony that are central to the standards and expectations of First Nations people (e.g. sorry business and following cultural protocols). Targeted funding for first language and culture resource development, translation and language revitalisation contributing to reported increased standards in cultural knowledge and writing, speaking and reading of first language for children, young people and adults. Elders identified the need and articulated cultural KPIs for all First Nations staff.
- **COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & WELLBEING:** Community governance and community plans strengthened, impacting quality and standards.

Progress made with standards and toward embedding excellence across all areas of delivery, are further evidenced throughout the evaluation.

COMPLIANCE, SAFETY AND STANDARDS – DEVELOPMENT WITH FIRST NATIONS STAFF

- Local policies, compliance and safety standards continued to be developed, updated and reviewed with the First Nations Governance Group, as did organisational policies and procedures that required cultural considerations.
- Compliance training increased significantly - both through cultural and western standards.
- Cultural safety standards and protocols continued to be shared amongst all staff and visitors.
- First Nations governance and leaders engaged in recruitment of any new staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) to ensure both cultural and western standards can be met.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- Increased First Nations leadership in Monitoring & Evaluation, supported by the Research & Evaluation team having the capacity to employ First Nations Community Researchers for the first time.
- Increased ability for evaluation interviews to be undertaken in first language, providing a deeper articulation in participant responses.
- Ongoing building and embedding of a culture of data and evaluation across staff and community groups.
- Established a purpose-built data entry system that collects and collates activity and participation data.
- Regular data feedback loops to staff and communities were achieved to a degree, though not consistently due to staff capacity and retention challenges. This will be an important focus going forward as it is critical to data sovereignty and data-informed planning.

ORGANISATIONAL BACKBONE STANDARDS AND SUPPORT

- Increased resourcing and growth in key organisational backbone functions of Human Resources, IT, Finance and Monitoring & Evaluation.
- Matured strategic and operational planning.
- Established an organisation-wide online mandatory compliance training system.
- Increased resources in Partnerships Investment and Communications teams.
- Increased social media presence, key to Children's Ground's contribution to the national discourse about First Nations people, promoting expectations of quality and celebrating strengths rather than deficit-based narratives.

- Undertook the biennial staff wellbeing survey, which found that staff wellbeing had increased, however, staff continued to experience challenges with workload due to the ongoing fast growth of Children's Ground without adequate resources.

WORKING TOWARDS 'EXPECTING & DELIVERING THE BEST'

In evaluation interviews of First Nations staff and family members, most people reported that 'Expecting and delivering the best' was a clear principle and way of working at Children's Ground, but this was not yet fully achieved.

People referred to Children's Ground always looking to and discussing how to improve processes and systems from a cultural and western perspective.

People talked about this principle in a range of contexts and areas across the CG Approach, including recruitment decisions and challenges, in relation to known workforce shortages in remote communities, the challenges of ensuring the 'right' people are employed and in relation to Children's Ground needing more staff to deliver the best. They also referred to communication and staff engagement, noting the need to always discuss and reiterate this as a key principle and supporting staff to work in this way. Some people talked about the similarities between this principle and 'Assuming and celebrating ability', in that by working with people's strengths, expecting and delivering the best can be achieved.

"We expect the best and we deliver the best we can. There're areas where we probably need another staff member. There're people struggling in some areas, and we are growing. It's just being patient."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“We’re always improving, we’re always looking at what’s not working, that’s why we’re always having meetings, if something comes up, we’re onto it. So, I think, we’re always trying to do better... if something does happen it’s like, ‘Okay stop, we need to focus on this...’ We’re always working together.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“You know we’ve been looking for someone to do [a health position]. You know we put it out there, there’s no one there so it can disrupt us as a team because then we don’t have the manpower to do everything that we need to do. But then you don’t want to settle for anyone just to fill those spaces because that’s probably going to create more work.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“I think everyone does expect the best but probably we can get better at delivering the best. Time management, making sure that people know their place and know their roles, and they have to be enthusiastic and motivated too to do it.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“So, it is just having conversations and reiterating, ‘This is one of our principles, we can’t deliver the whole, we can’t do all of this if we’re not delivering the best’.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Fifty-fifty. We say it all the time, ‘Guys pick up your game,’ and we’re always saying, ‘Expect and deliver the best,’ but I don’t think we are yet... So yeah, I think that is something that is still a work in progress.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



Perspectives of First Nations staff/family members were consistent with findings from the anonymous survey of staff (n=34) where: 86% of staff either agreed (57%) or strongly agreed (29%) that Children's Ground expects and delivers the best across the CG Approach.

In evaluation interviews, local services were asked what they saw as strengths of the CG Approach. In addition to noting how Children's Ground's centres First Nations people and culture (reported further on), each service referred to elements of the CG Approach as implementing leading practice.

"It's the strongest community engagement model I've ever seen, genuine. And that level of, I guess, intergenerational, like getting everyone in and finding a place for everyone. And that real absolute grassroots ground up building of something that's its strongest... they [Children's Ground] do have a strong theoretical model that they hold true to in the way that they work, I think that's pretty impressive."

"I think that the nature of the [Children's Ground] board [Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme] and the nature of the organisation, there's not a hierarchy of seniority in terms of your positioning, in terms of the kinship system or the different Aboriginal cultural groups. Whereas in some Aboriginal orgs, the cultural authority is at the top."

"What I see with Children's Ground, is that the employees there, Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal, really do see a deep commitment to the vision, the values and the organisation and the long-term approach – a really deep personal

commitment to the people that they work with and what they're trying to achieve, which is really refreshing."

"I think Children's Ground has that really grassroots advocacy perspective that's really needed. And it might not be shared by other services, but it's essential that families have the service that have their back in that way."

"You know for every \$1.00 they have we've probably got \$100... I'm doing things that Children's Ground do on their budget. It just shows you how you can execute a plan with the funding that you've got and be able to build it in a sustainable way. So, I'd like to put that on the record."

LOCAL SERVICES PROVIDERS, 2023 & 2024



SUMMARY

Over the period, progress toward improved standards was achieved. Children's Ground continued to make progress and work towards expecting and delivering the best. Evaluation findings demonstrate that it takes time to build high-quality standards and achieve excellence.

Increased funding and resources enabled progress and growing effectiveness in key processes, delivery areas and organisational systems and supports.

Ongoing implementation of the 'growth model' may have continued to hinder progress in some areas. However, it also enabled the grass-roots slower growth towards achieving excellence.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

IWENHEKE APEKE UNTE LYERNPENYE UNTE ANTHETYEKE (EXPECT AND DELIVER THE BEST)

People talked about different things here. They are saying that Children's Ground shows that they care about people and that we are Aboriginal people first.

Children's Ground is one of a kind, trying to lead the way in changing things. And that comes from the bottom up. People can see families leading, they see young people leading the sessions too. And they can see we are all part of the governance and that decisions are made on the ground, not at the top. 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 every day of their lives. And this is the right way to work.

People are saying that Children's Ground is for everyone, and they want to bring in everyone from our communities. They are saying to all families – come and work at Children's Ground.

People are feeling that their voice matters, that they matter. And this encourages people to speak up more.

A few good interactions and being encouraged to talk and seeing others talk, all help people to feel confident to talk. The encouragement is important with the space and opportunity to talk.

Everyone has the opportunity to know what's going on across the whole organisation.



Like the money story – knowing why we can't just employ anyone who wants a job, because we don't have enough money, or we don't have the money in the area they want to work in.

It's good that there are First Nations co-Directors who are involved in information and decisions made for the organisation too. To have Aboriginal people in those roles is important and to have people from our communities in those roles. They are not often jobs that you see our families in. For our people to see our families in Directorship roles is probably one of the biggest things because then our families can see that it's possible and can aspire to be in those types of roles for their cultural knowledge, and what they bring from their knowledge and their life experiences.

People see that these are real people in these positions, real people who have the challenges that many have, but they can do these jobs, and they are working to change the system for their families – for our families, for our children – to bring our culture up first. We pretty much have both [First Nation and non-First Nations] in all these positions and that stands out to people, to our families.

Our First Nations people are part of the [recruitment] interviewing, whatever position it is we are part of it, so people can have their input and have their say and ask the questions. There are also people here [First Nations and non-First Nations] who have been here a long time that people know and trust.

And when someone comes in to apply for a job, whether it be learning or health or something else, they trust the people [from Children's Ground] that are hiring them.

There's that trust in those people that have been here for so long to hire the right people for positions.

Families see that we go ahead without all the funding we need. But we don't compromise. We don't take money from Coke because we are about healthy choices, and we don't want to be selling the Coke brand. It shows we are doing it properly. Everything we do is carefully considered. Like the Yes campaign. Just because we are an Aboriginal organisation and a lot of us wanted Yes, we still didn't put the Yes flag up, which is good because what if someone did want to say No and felt like they couldn't. We made that decision because everyone has a right to their choice. That's one thing Children's Ground has always done, is consider people's point of views as individuals. We don't tell people this is what we want as the organisation, it's about what the people want.

Children's Ground reacts to everything in the community. When Children's Ground react and support people during sorry business, people see that the organisation is doing things the right way.

And even smoking out the Children's Ground when there's sorry business and being out there with the families in community. And all the staff they respect the boundaries and things that need to be done – and people feel that respect for their culture and in turn they respect the organisation back.

Sometimes our families still go out and do sessions [early learning] during sorry business if they want to – and families can make that decision on their own because they fully understand their family. So, our staff don't ask families if they want to go and do a session during sorry business – because that family will decide and tell you if they do. And if they don't do sessions, the kids are still learning during sorry business.



ASSUME & CELEBRATE ABILITY

“Everyone brings different skills and experience and what they’re good at. Everyone’s got their own weaknesses and strengths and there’s so many different people with so many different skills that we can also share and work around.”

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

This principle seeks to ensure a strength-based approach that assumes ability is inherent in the CG Approach. It recognises knowledge, skills and talent in children, young people and families. This moves away from deficit and crisis-focused services and approaches that remain the dominant service paradigm, often driven by siloed, crisis, deficit funding programs and KPIs.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Recognise the ability of children, families and community and build upon this strength.
- Cultural expertise, standards and safety are embedded in design, governance, delivery and evaluation.
- Flexibility and responsiveness to each child, family and community and creating environments where people succeed and their talent can shine.

Throughout this evaluation period, Children’s Ground continued to operationalise this principle in the following ways:

- Increasing the number and type of culturally-based positions across the CG Approach.
- Privileging and embedding first language, culture, knowledge systems and practice.
- Ongoing implementation of a no barriers, no failure and non-punitive approach to employment.
- Cultural curriculum, assessment, practice and standards that support and recognise child competence and learning context, establishing environments for success.
- Enhanced individualised Learning & Wellbeing plans, regular celebrations of children’s learning, development and talent.
- Ongoing family and community events and celebrations.

In the anonymous surveys, staff (n=34) and local services (n=7) were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that 'Children's Ground recognises and celebrates the strength of culture and community'.

- 100% of staff agreed (17%) or strongly agreed (83%).
- 86% of local services agreed (43%) or strongly agreed (43%).

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members, the strongest theme to emerge was people feeling valued, respected and included based on their cultural knowledge and strengths.

"Children's Ground does that, everyone has their own knowledge and things and what we're learning. And we celebrate our language, our culture, our artists – celebrate all the things in many ways."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"And we help each other out, like there's things that you're good at, there's things that I'm good at."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We celebrate everybody's ability. People can be artists. People can be songwriters. People can be teaching little children to dance. Maybe cook food or whatever. Everybody does everything."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that Children's Ground continued to implement this principle effectively through deliberate processes and practices that acknowledge, respect and build on people's strengths and abilities. For many First Nations staff and family members, this included their cultural strengths. People also referred to Children's Ground bringing people together with different strengths.

In practice, this principle has been a pivotal underpinning of delivering the CG Approach. It has created a foundation for respect and possibility. People have built confidence through recognition of their strengths and abilities.

People reportedly feeling valued, respected and recognised as having strengths and abilities is particularly stark in the context of the often deficit-focused discourse about the 'Aboriginal problem'.





FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

MWARRENTYE ARLE ARNE MPWAREME RENHE TNAKETYEKE (USE AND CELEBRATE PEOPLE'S ABILITY AND STRENGTH)

People [First Nations staff and families] are saying that we always celebrate people's abilities, we celebrate people's different skills that they bring, we value people for their input. And we support people to build on their skills. People are valued for what they bring. Because everyone can have different skills and different ways of seeing things about something to make it work. Everyone has their own abilities and that is celebrated.

People are saying that we are valued for our cultural knowledge and skills. And get paid in that area, they don't need a piece of paper to show they are an expert at this or that [cultural knowledge]. They actually know it and carry it with them.

Being employed for cultural knowledge helps people fulfil their cultural responsibilities and obligations to the organisation but also to the people it belongs to. Like if you had to teach a song or dance that was done to all the people who had to learn. But now there's only a few people who know. But here there's that extra push that it's part of your job. You don't have to try and create spaces for it [outside of work], it's part of your job and for some, that's why they got employed. And it's also your responsibility to pass it on to the next generation – to bring it to this place and teach it and pass it on to the next generation.



People might get a job somewhere else and then that cultural teaching can be neglected because of time. But when you work at a place where that's valued, and they know how important it is, and you have room to build on it and share it. And with support for transport to go out bush on country, the songs and dances can be taught in the right place, on the right country for whatever song or dance it is.

Here the kids get the best of everyone. Like you're not made to do things that you don't have confidence to, we walk with people to do that. Like somebody who does the smoking [baby/child smoking], they say to the younger ones [younger adults], 'you do it', and then you see sometimes the younger ones doing it. And by employing people with all different knowledge and skills, there is always going to be someone who can do it and teach it to the next generation.

When there's grandparents there, the kids get their teaching, patience and knowledge. The kids get the best of everyone with all their different skills and when it's intergenerational.

People are saying they feel valued because we celebrate everyone's abilities. They feel valued as people, for their language and culture and knowledge. That's something that has never really happened in organisations.

Here people are valued just because they're willing to have a go and have an interest in it – even if they don't have a big history of experience in an area – and that's ok. Like people who have been unemployed they might not know what they are good at. So, a lot of people find themselves, they get their foot in the door and then you are in there and you might see all areas and think you'd like to do that or this – and you can see where you fit in. People are talking about a lot of pride at Children's Ground. People feeling valued and that they have something to contribute. That they are passing that knowledge on that they have. They are getting to pass it on to the next generation. And it's not going to be forgotten, what they know.

It also gives people a personal purpose within themselves that they have something that they can do, that job that they can go to. With the conditions people are living in, at least they have a job where they can go and work alongside family.

Probably their lives are shitty, they never get any peace in life, but knowing that they have this job, it's actually meaningful, and gives them purpose for themselves and for their little family. Because it's helping them to change themselves, then they can share it with others.

It's that little bit of encouragement and support in small ways for people and recognising what skills they have and for them to be valued for it.

Instead of saying you need all these trainings to work here, Children's Ground looks beyond that – it's not about having a piece of paper that shows you're really qualified for this or that. It's seeing actually the people from within and the skills they bring to Children's Ground for First Nations people.



**CULTURALLY
SAFE**

“That’s what it’s all about [cultural safety] because without that— that’s our grassroots centre pole. That what holds the tent up, is culture and old people.”

65+ YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

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.

The principle of ‘Culturally safe’ intends to ensure Children’s Ground is an environment that centres a First Nations world view, is culturally responsive and prioritises the cultural safety and respect for all people.

In 2020, Children’s Ground added the tenth principle of ‘Culturally safe’. Before this, it was considered fundamental to all aspects of the CG Approach, and explicitly within principles ‘Assume and celebrate ability’, ‘Combine old and new ways’ and ‘Expect and deliver the best’. However, during staff reflections on the principles, it was identified that this principle needed to be visible and articulated clearly. It allows formal evaluation on the extent to which governance and delivery of the CG Approach is culturally safe.

Adding this principle provided a clear pathway for all staff to consider not only if and how they are embedding first language and culture into delivery, but also how they are ensuring that western delivery and all Children’s Ground environments are culturally safe and centred.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Ensure Children’s Ground is an environment that centres a First Nations world view and privileges over 65,000 years of knowledge and practice.
- Deliver services, environments and systems that value, respect and embed First Nations people and cultural knowledge, practices and systems.
- Ensure First Nations people feel comfortable and safe within all Children’s Ground environments, as participants, employees, leaders and supporters.
- Ensure First Nations people feel the freedom to follow uncompromised cultural practices and systems.

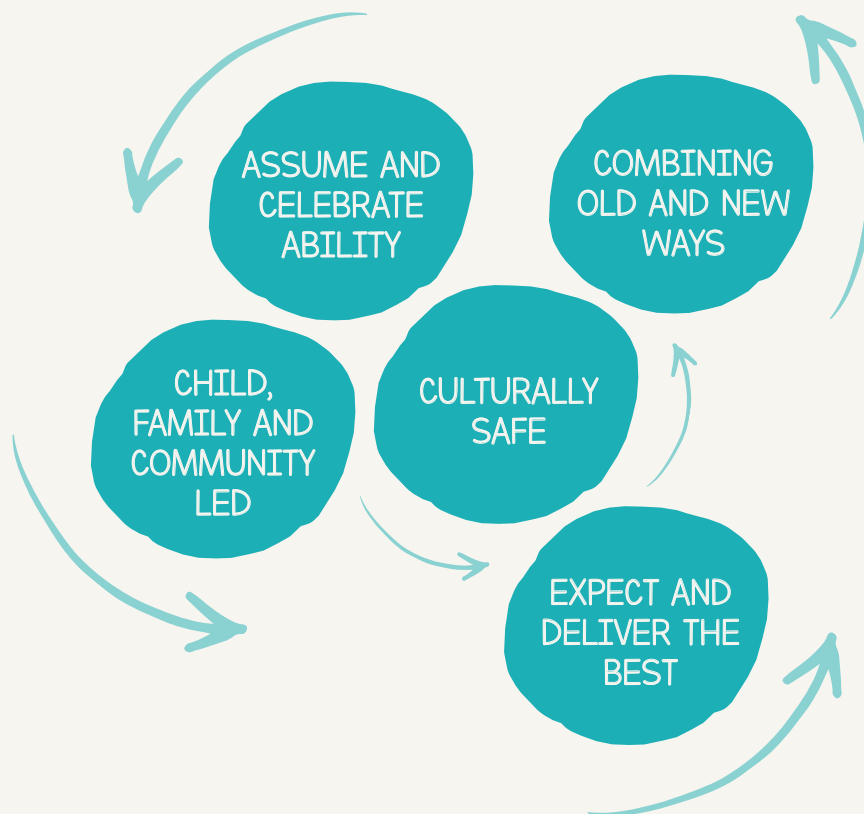
Evidence evaluating this principle has been presented to a degree in all previous principles, notably, 'Assume and celebrate ability', 'Combining old and new ways', 'Child, family and community led' and 'Expect and deliver the best'.

Enacting the principle of 'Culturally safe' is a culmination of local and organisational systems and structures, policies, practices and

people. Collectively, these seek to create an environment that ensures First Nations people have the freedom 'to be First Nations people' without compromise.

Figure 17 represents the interconnectedness between the principles, within which processes and systems are embedded.

FIGURE 17: KEY PRINCIPLES INFORMING CULTURAL SAFETY



In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members, the strongest themes to emerge around cultural safety were: 1) People feeling comfortable and confident at Children's Ground – feeling like they could 'be themselves', and 2) Children's Ground respecting cultural process, protocols and responsibilities.

People reported feeling comfortable and confident because they could see their language and culture 'everywhere' in Children's Ground delivery and environments and because they are working and engaging alongside their family.

People also reported feeling like Children's Ground's non-First Nations staff respected them and that they are 'part of the family'.

Children's Ground respecting cultural process, protocols and responsibilities has been a common thread and theme throughout this process evaluation section but is particularly relevant here because people reported not feeling 'bad' about having to take time away from work and engagement in delivery due to sorry business and to support young people through cultural ceremonies.

"I just see it here. A lot of people get that time off that they need because they're required to. And then they don't feel like they're going against their family and ruin their family responsibilities or even relationships with people because they did what they needed to do and now they're coming back to work."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Children's Ground recognises that cultural ceremonies are important times for families to come together and follow cultural protocols. These are known to be critical to cultural identity as First Nations people and are important for the experiential cultural teaching and learning with children, young people and adults of all ages. Therefore, there are no punitive measures when families take time away from employment or education to follow these cultural protocols and responsibilities.

Further, where possible, Children's Ground provides practical and logistical support for periods of sorry business and for funerals. This support maintains a connection with families during these periods and encourages families to return to work and education sooner.

All First Nations staff and family members interviewed reported that Children's Ground is a culturally safe place to be and work. Often reported alongside the main two themes was people feeling comfortable and Children's Ground being culturally safe because 'family are here'.

"You don't have to pretend to be someone you're not or hide how you really feel."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I think Children's Ground culture, it is culturally safe. That's probably the one thing that straightaway I have no doubt that it's culturally safe. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't..."

"They understand our cultural responsibilities, our obligations as well as just life in general. This is probably the first time in all of my working career that I feel safe, culturally, and just for me as a person."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"They've got to do that [be culturally safe], they've got to respect our First Nations because it's our right and that's our free will."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I think it's important to have First Nations staff because at the same time you're working with First Nations people, so you need First Nations staff. Because they'll help understand, they'll know how to talk the language. They'll make it safe."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Culturally you're safe because they're here with their families."

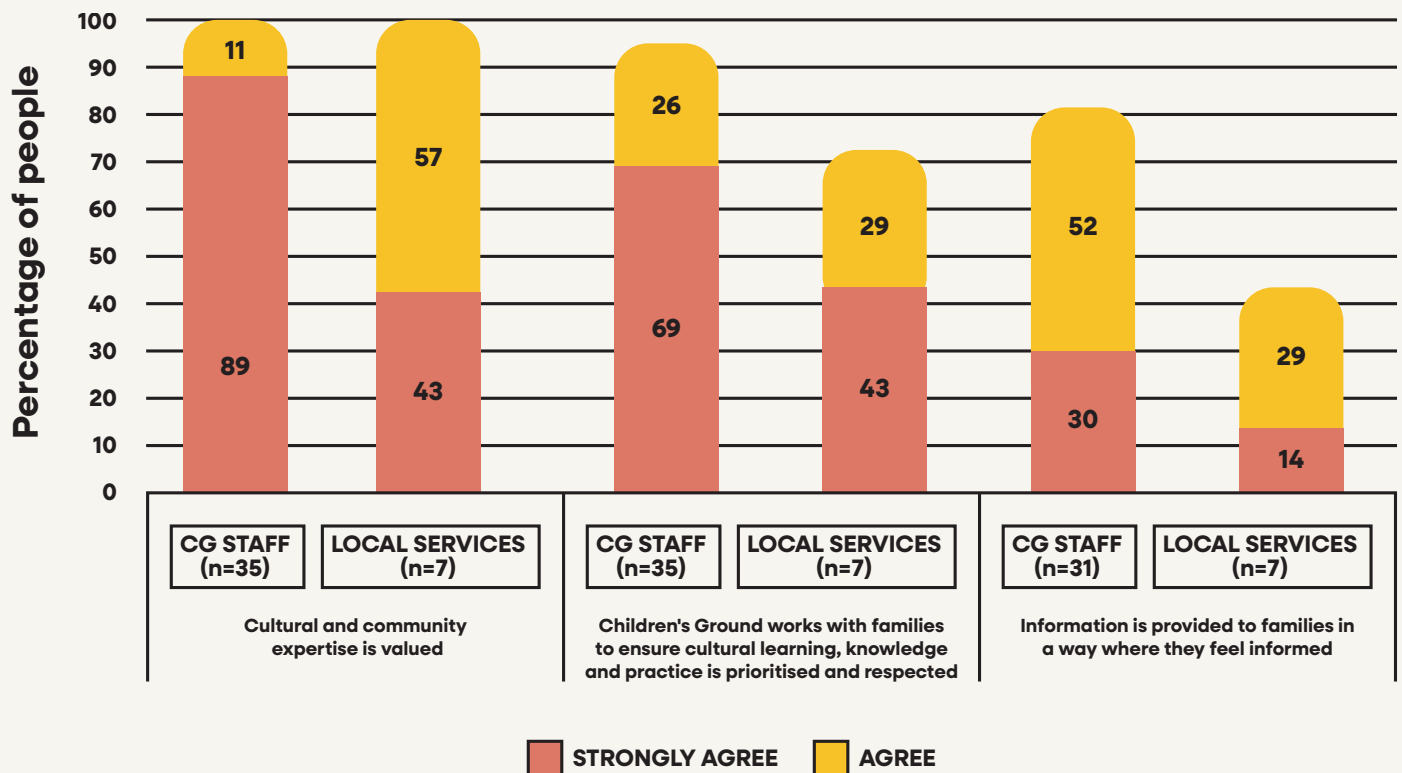
**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We are [culturally safe]. Children's Ground are really strong and how I see it, it's really safe place for family to work in. With good families and good workers, work colleagues, that support you at Children's Ground."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

In the anonymous survey, Children's Ground staff and local services were asked the extent to which they felt Children's Ground recognises, values and celebrates First Nations culture. Graph 6 shows their responses.

GRAPH 6: EXTENT TO WHICH CHILDREN'S GROUND RECOGNISES, VALUES AND CELEBRATES CULTURE



Children's Ground staff and local services agreed that Children's Ground recognises and values First Nations culture and expertise and ensures cultural learning is respected and enacted. The data also shows that Children's Ground needs to continue working towards providing information to families in ways that ensure they feel informed.

No local services disagreed, however, some responded 'don't know' to how Children's Ground ensures cultural learning occurs and how information is provided to families. This is likely due to the different types of service partnerships.

Local services were asked broadly what they saw as any strengths of the CG Approach. Four of six services reported Children's Ground's centring of First Nations people and culture as one of the greatest strengths.

"I just think the way that the First Nations culture and ways of learning are front and centre, that in itself is so phenomenal and so wonderful to see happening."

"Their [Children's Ground's] strength is their uniqueness, like us... it's their cultural knowledge... and absolutely in their members... And they're trying to use that uniqueness and strength to build healthy families and you can't build healthy families without that cultural knowledge. So, they have the key ingredient and everything else spins off the back of it."

"The privileging of Aboriginal voice and Aboriginal leadership, building capacity, Aboriginal governance, the strengthening of the governance around what they do and working with a very functional Aboriginal board, which is not always common in Aboriginal organisations. That's their biggest strength."

LOCAL SERVICES PROVIDERS, 2023 & 2024

SUMMARY

An organisation can state they are culturally safe, but unless it is felt and reported by First Nations people, it cannot be evidenced as being achieved.

The most critical evidence that Children's Ground is on track with implementing this principle is reports by First Nations staff and family members that they feel safe and valued as First Nations people.

Children's Ground being culturally safe is supported by reports from all stakeholder groups (families, staff, local services).

Data presented in this section and across the other principles demonstrates that culturally safe and centred practice are pivotal to equitable access and that the principle of 'Culturally safe' is the glue that extends across and through the CG Approach and binds all practices and principles together. It has shown that 'who people are' – their cultural identity as First Nations people – is respected and valued as the foundation of all delivery.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS

ARNTARNTA ARETYEKE
TYERRTYE MAPE ANTE
ITERRENTYE ANWERNE-KENHE
NTHENHELE APEKE ANWERNE
WARRKE-IRREMELE
(TO PROTECT AND KEEP OUR
KNOWLEDGE AND PEOPLE SAFE
WHEREVER WE ENGAGE AND
WORK).

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 up.

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 – and for everyone who is here in Children's Ground has a safe place culturally.

Cultural safety in places is not 'provided', it is felt. You can't just say you're culturally safe, people have to feel it. So obviously people do feel they are culturally safe because so many are saying it, and they wouldn't be here if they didn't feel it. Each community, they're the ones that hold that value, what has been spoken by the Elders, about keeping a safe place for everyone to practice and do what we need to do as Arrernte people.

The cultural safety makes people want to be here.



You don't have to get leave for sorry business because there is that safety at work that you can go back early or later and that's ok – you're welcome back when you can, you're not judged if you work during sorry business to take your mind off things or if you take longer to come back. And people can do what works for them during sorry times because they feel culturally safe at Children's Ground. There's so much death that happens and people grieve in different ways and process it all individually. For some, Children's Ground is a little sanctuary for them in these times and they just come and sit. It gives people and families space to grieve in their own way and work and participate when they want or can – and always maintaining a connection with people during these times.

People are talking about Children's Ground's uniqueness. Saying we have the recipe – we have the key ingredients and everything else spins off the back of that. A lot of people know that most organisations are going with what they've been told, and this is what they think is right, but people are saying we have the key ingredient of working with the families leading it – it's 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.



STAY FOR THE LONG TERM

“We’re here for the long term. We are doing it for the long term. What we learnt, we are now teaching our young kids and then our young children will teach their children to keep it strong together... for young people and also for ourselves.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

First Nations people have experienced over 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.

This principle of ‘Stay for the long term’ moves away from a traditional ‘quick fix’ approach and promotes consistent and sustained support of children and young people from 0 to 25 years – ensuring all major transition periods across the life-course are supported.

Children’s Ground’s 25-year vision and strategy intends to work and walk with children and their families and community from their earliest years, throughout primary and secondary education and into their early adult years.

WHAT IS BEING EVALUATED WITHIN THIS PRINCIPLE?

- Provide a consistent and sustained system of services and supports over 25 years, that are designed, governed, delivered and evaluated by local First Nations people.
- Transform disadvantage to opportunity by creating a new pathway for a generation of children to grow up secure in their culture and identity and with the cultural and western skills for lifelong wellbeing and rights.
- Disrupt the status quo of short-term funding cycles that do not allow the time for First Nations people to become empowered to lead their own solutions.

The longevity of the CG Approach can only be assessed over time, with progress towards sustainable operations monitored six-monthly. This evaluation provides evidence that Children’s Ground has been able to sustain the CG Approach, create stability, consistency and certainty for communities where service access has previously been unreliable and subject to change.

Throughout this second evaluation period, Children's Ground consolidated the following indicators of progress made towards achieving this principle in the first evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia (2017 to 2019):

- Establishing and strengthening regional level governance and leadership, and establishing community level governance.
- Establishing and increasing local First Nations employment, within the resources of a growth model.
- Establishing place-based delivery.
- Establishing and increasing access to child and family engagement in learning, health and wellbeing services and supports.
- Growth in funding and delivery over time towards implementation of the full CG Approach.

Children's Ground made progress in each area, except for increasing place-based delivery which remains challenging due to infrastructure access.

Children's Ground has the authority, strategy and commitment from communities to 'Stay for the long term'. This is provided and enabled through First Nations governance structures that include Traditional Owners, Elders and community leaders for each community and collectively.

Establishing and growing collective whole-of-community First Nations governance structures has been an important priority for Children's Ground to ensure long term cultural authority of the CG Approach and to mitigate risks of non-First Nations influence over community aspirations, plans and decision-making.

While the CG Approach is a long-term strategy, funding is not yet secured for the full CG Approach, nor the 25-year journey of generational change. However, an important achievement in this evaluation period was Children's Ground growing operational funding and purchasing a permanent home and

central hub in Alice Springs through generous philanthropic support. A permanent central hub has given Children's Ground communities increased confidence and hope for the longevity of the CG Approach.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations family/staff members articulated the importance of this principle for children and families.

"The hard one is convincing people that this young kid here is entitled to all that support all the way through to university or whatever they choose to do, and that's how you're going to get those outcomes. But governments are loathe to fund that long, for long term even though they still do with organisations that don't produce the results."

**65+ YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"You see little changes... those magic moments or those smaller stories because it gives you that little bit of encouragement or insight or a little bit of motivation... And you just got to remind yourself that this took decades to get to where we are and now it's [positive change] going to take a while too. I'm excited to see changes and what that looks like because it's really new."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

[Stay long-term] “It’s good, because you’re just so used to changing teachers... It’s consistency in their [children’s] lives... at least they know when it comes to education it’s consistent... You don’t have teachers just coming in to do their two-year stints in a remote community, and then going, and then you’ve got to get another one in. So, it is just having relationships with your educators, and your families.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Children’s Ground is doing really good from the early years to stay for a generation. Make sure we have a strong relationship with our teenagers, from that teenage age for our kids to grow up. We want them to grow up and learn more in CG that we are here to support them, that’s why we want to stay here for a generation.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

SUMMARY

Children’s Ground’s effectiveness in implementing this principle can only be assessed as a moment in time, with ‘Stay for the long-term’ only able to be genuinely assessed over the long-term.

At this point in time, evaluation findings presented here and throughout this process evaluation section show that Children’s Ground is building the key foundations for achieving sustained change over the long-term, including demonstrating growth since the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019). This excludes securing the long-term funding required to deliver the full CG Approach over the 25-year approach.

The evidence shows that Children’s Ground’s First Nations staff who have been actively involved in designing, governing and delivering the CG Approach with their communities know the importance of the long-term approach and the steps Children’s Ground is making towards achieving this.

Recognising the limitations of the ‘growth model’ and given the history of stop-start programs in First Nations communities resulting in a lack of consistency and time to see impact – it is important for Children’s Ground to set clear and achievable expectations with First Nations leaders and communities. While evidence presented throughout this process evaluation section has demonstrated that First Nations staff and family members continue to aspire to and seek greater engagement of children and families (particularly young people) and more widespread local employment, people do acknowledge the financial limitations of what can be achieved within the current growth model. But their aspirations demonstrate their commitment to the long-term approach.

Collectively, this evidence demonstrates that Children’s Ground is prioritising taking the time to engage and empower people and communities to build local ownership, social, cultural and economic capital as the necessary building blocks and foundations for longevity.



FIRST NATIONS ANALYSIS



**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 getting the families and kids together. We are giving kids that early start and good education to start off – and that's from the beginning with the families. It [change] may not be big or major yet, but it's there, and it's a long-term process for it to happen. It's not going to happen overnight the way governments think when they give out funding for 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 saying sometimes organisations start up and they change as they grow and priorities change, whereas Children's Ground is staying true to its core.

People are so used to projects starting and stopping. Projects and people come and go, and things die off. And because people are so used to that they think we don't want to invest in something mentally and 'everythingly' if it's just going to stop tomorrow – and get us all excited for this new thing that just ends. And some good things have worked for a short while and then they are taken away because they don't have any more funding – and that's how people just become disillusioned with government and other organisations – because they just roll out the same short-term programs.

So, people don't invest their time and energy because they know that so many things don't last.

For us [Children's Ground], 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, we are always communicating that – and we see it, that's why we have the funders come visit – it's all trying to help us to stay longer with the communities.

We are always communicating with people about the vision, like we want that primary learning next, and we are doing little actions to make it happen – and people can see that starting to happen. And we secured this place [Children's Ground owned hub property] – people see we are committed to the long-term. People believe that CG will stay for the long term.

The communication part is really important. We have always shared the money story with people – we've always been upfront and not promising people things we can't do and being transparent about what's happening and where we are heading and where we are at with the money story.

So, we can assess ourselves too to see how we are going well and not. In other organisations you never hear the money story, it sits at the top – it's so far up that it's nothing to do with the people on the ground – but here all that information is transparent to everyone.

When we get to go to conferences and talk and share, we are being heard by a lot of other people out there. These things make a difference to people, being part of us staying 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.

A lot of people just come and go from other organisations, because at the end of the day it's just a job. But people here know it can be life changing, and it has been for people – not for everyone yet, but for some individuals and families it has been a life changer, and even a lifesaver for some.



4.3: WESTERN PROCESS ANALYSIS: HAS THE CG APPROACH BEEN IMPLEMENTED AS INTENDED?

HOW HAS THE CG APPROACH BEEN IMPLEMENTED AS INTENDED – IN THE CONTEXT OF A ‘GROWTH MODEL’, COMPARED TO THE FULL CG APPROACH?

Children’s Ground’s ten principles guide the integrity and delivery of the CG Approach. The Children’s Ground strategy requires all ten principles to be operating consistently and concurrently to achieve systemic reform and long-term change. Each principle offers a key condition recognised by First Nations and western evidence and knowledge as critical to achieving change. Individually they are important. Together, they provide a comprehensive response to redress complex injustice and entrenched disadvantage. This is one of the points of difference of the CG Approach.

Children’s Ground asserts that this systemic approach is needed to respond to the impact of oppression, colonisation, generational systemic abuse, denial of political and cultural inclusion and rights, and ongoing structural discrimination of First Nations people in mainstream systems.

This second evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia found that Children’s Ground implemented the Approach with integrity to the principles, building on the initial three-year period of operations (2017 to 2019).

The CG Approach has not been implemented to the extent desired within the full model, with some areas of delivery compromised by limited resources, and others progressing well. Children’s Ground remains in a growth period until the full model is funded and implemented.

The evaluation evidence indicates that Children’s Ground successfully implemented the ten principles consistently and concurrently, but with varying levels of strength. It demonstrated strong integrity in the principles of ‘Child, family and community-led’, ‘Culturally safe’, ‘Assume ability’, ‘Start early’ and ‘Combine the old and new’. The principle of ‘Critical mass’ is close to achieving its target, meaning that Children’s Ground is building strong community-wide reach.

The principle of ‘Deliver the whole, not the bits’ has improved since the first evaluation but has been impacted by funding and resource constraints. The principle of ‘In community (place-based)’, which is a critical driver for change, is occurring but not to the extent intended – this has also faced significant challenges due to both resource constraints and resistance within the external (systems) authorising environment and access to existing infrastructure in community.



The principle of 'Expect and deliver the best' is not yet being delivered to the extent intended, however, all staff are committed to this principle and systems and process are maturing to support this to be achieved. People are recognising that they deserve the best; second best is no longer satisfactory nor good enough. First Nations people who have lived with substandard services, structural racism and discrimination are determining that they deserve better.

The principle of 'Stay for the long term' will be assessed over the 25-year period, but it is clear that the intention of this principle offers confidence to people who have been subject to poor continuity in the service system.

This evaluation demonstrates that Children's Ground has shown integrity to the CG Approach and has established a new system offering, designed and led by First Nations people. The CG Approach is putting into practice recommended service design principles and key conditions for change that are recognised in international and national evidence bases.^{53 54 55 56}

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

54 Moore, TG; Fry, R. 2011. Place-based Services: A Literature Review. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health.

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

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



GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

The importance of effective engagement and empowerment of communities in the design, production and evaluation of initiatives seeking to support them, has been demonstrated throughout western evidence for decades. Robust, locally-responsive governance structures that ensure and enable communities to re-configure and design their local service system to meet the needs of local children and families has been evidenced in innovative whole of community models.^{57 58 59 60}

Evidence shows that services are more effective and people's needs are better met when they are involved in an equal and reciprocal relationship with service professionals and systems. In Australia, First Nations people's place at the forefront of service design and delivery has been recommended through decades of inquiries and increasingly emerging in research.^{61 62 63 64}

Evaluation evidence presented throughout this process findings section demonstrates that Children's Ground has well established governance structures in place at regional and community levels, with First Nations people actively engaging in the design and delivery of the CG Approach with their community.

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

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

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

60 Donahue, JD; Zeckhauser, RJ. 2011. Collaborative Governance: Private Roles for Public Goals in Turbulent Times. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

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

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

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

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

Evidence shows that, in this evaluation period, local community governance strengthened, building on the first evaluation period. It showed that governance became routine, with people reporting an increase in their experience and confidence to participate and speak up as part of governance and decision-making.

Evaluation findings show that the establishment of First Nations-only governance meetings increased opportunities for First Nations leadership in safe and confidential spaces. This has been an important development in Children's Ground's growth and was achieved only after first taking the time over five years to establish regional governance and to strengthen community governance. This has increased people's experience of 'being heard', seeing their opinions matter and recognising their own talent and contribution to making a difference.

Confidence to actively participate in governance and leadership was enabled through effective delivery of other principles: 'Assume and celebrate ability'; 'Culturally safe'; and 'Combining the old and new'.

By providing opportunities for people to engage in environments, systems and roles that recognise, celebrate and draw on their strengths, people reported feeling valued, respected and comfortable. Coupled with feelings of cultural safety, where people reported they 'could be themselves' and speak their language and see, teach, learn and enact their culture; these have been critical to people feeling confident to actively engage.

Collectively, by implementing these principles effectively and as intended, Children's Ground provided environments where people feel comfortable and safe to engage and build their confidence in governance, leadership and decision-making – which is an essential foundation and building block for increased agency and self-determination.

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, and created long awaited pathways for local governance and decision making.





CULTURALLY SAFE AND CENTRED ACCESS

A significant focus of the first six years of the CG Approach has been establishing and achieving equitable access to education, health, employment and other services, supports and opportunities. For Children's Ground, access goes beyond physical access to a service to include access with cultural safety and culturally-centred delivery with community governance and staff.

Western research links the importance of community leadership and decision making to ensuring community-based services where people live are linguistically, socially and culturally accessible and relevant to those they are designed for.^{65 66 67 68} Sobo et al (2006) state, *"formal service systems have a culture of their own, and for parents to make good use of it requires them to master the language, roles and values of that culture"*.⁶⁹ This supports the notion that physical access to services alone will not result in equitable service access. It also supports the need for people to see their language and culture reflected in the services seeking to support and engage them.

The Centre for Community Child Health and The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute also identified that, *"A key feature of effective engagement is respect for culture and context. Unless families and communities feel that their culture is respected and their local circumstances understood, they will not respect or make good use of the services and facilities provided"*.⁷⁰

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that Children's Ground implemented the principles 'Culturally safe' and 'Combining old and new ways' effectively and as intended. It demonstrated that this was achieved by embedding first language and culture across all areas of the CG Approach. In practice, this was only achieved through extensive employment of local, community-based First Nations staff with cultural expertise.

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

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

67 Smith, G. 2003. Kaupapa Maori Theory: Theorizing Indigenous Transformation of Education & Schooling; 'Kaupapa Maori Symposium' NZARE / AARE Joint Conference Hyatt Hotel, Auckland, N.Z.

68 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.

69 Sobo, EJ; Seid, M; Gelhard, LR. 2006. Parent-identified barriers to pediatric health care: A process-oriented model Health Services Research, 41 (1).

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

In particular, quotes from First Nations staff/family members articulate the notion and feelings of cultural safety from a range of different perspectives, including: working alongside family and other First Nations people; enacting cultural protocols and responsibilities; and respect for First Nations people.

Effective implementation of principle 'A critical mass (work with everyone)' has seen broad reach across communities of people of all ages. This has started to establish culturally centred service access as a new 'norm' for a majority of children and families. This is a critical foundation for whole of community prevention and change over time.

Strong governance at a regional and community level has also been evidenced as critical enablers for culturally safe and centred design and delivery. As has the principle of Stay for the long-term, with sustained delivery providing families and communities with regular opportunities to access, engage and build relationships with confidence and trust in the CG Approach and service.

The first evaluation report evidenced that local design of culturally safe services shifted delivery from a western deficit/problem focus to a strength-based foundation. The articulation of the Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye learning and curriculum framework designed by Arrernte educators is an example of this. Organisational policies and procedures developed with First Nations staff have embedded structural standards and practices that value First Nations ways of doing and being. This in turn strengthens cultural safety and wellbeing.

From this foundation, this evaluation and delivery period demonstrated increased empowerment of people to navigate, use, lead and understand services and build agency within individuals and families, including children from their earliest years.

Other key drivers for cultural safety have been the strength-based approach (principle 'Assume and celebrate ability'). In First Nations communities, there is a history of service delivery that focuses on a deficit paradigm established against western benchmarks that are elusive in First Nations communities due to structural and racial barriers that diminish First Nations cultures. This forces First Nations community members into a permanent power imbalance and perpetuates both a stereotypical narrative and status quo of the 'Aboriginal problem'.

This evaluation demonstrated that, by celebrating people's strengths and abilities through the creation of culturally-based employment and the provision of spaces and encouragement for people enacting and engaging with cultural protocols and practices, Children's Ground established culturally, physically and emotionally safe service access. This is complemented by and enabled through a flexible approach to employment and engagement that supports key cultural obligations such as sorry business.

Collectively, these have been instrumental in achieving equitable service, access to and engagement in culturally safe and centred delivery and increased cultural empowerment, safety and wellbeing.



PREVENTION AND HOLISTIC SERVICE ACCESS

The CG Approach is a holistic integrated system that focuses on prevention. Children's Ground's principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' places preventative, integrated and holistic wellbeing front and centre for all delivery. Coupled with the principles of 'Start early' and 'Critical mass (work with everyone)', these ways of working ensure that holistic delivery centres children as the focus of activities, however, always within the intergenerational context of children, family and community – from Elders to adults and young people.

Globally, research highlights the importance of the early years for future wellbeing, particularly in children who experience early childhood stress and trauma.^{71 72 73 74} Silburn et al identify that, "The earlier in life that prevention and intervention can begin, the greater the opportunity for shifting children's developmental pathways in a positive direction".⁷⁵

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground continued to implement the principle of 'Start early' effectively and as intended within the resources of the growth model. Young children and their families had increased access to early learning with holistic health promotion integrated. They also had regular access to targeted health promotion and support as individuals and within family groups and households, and as employees of Children's Ground.

Moore (2024) moves away from a deficit analysis and looks at the positive experiences and conditions needed for both children and their families to maximise their potential and flourish.⁷⁶ Moore identifies prevention and a focus on the first two years of life and early development as a core condition for children. For families, their social support networks and access to a range of universal and tiered child and family services is critical.⁷⁷

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

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

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

74 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.

75 *ibid*

76 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>.

77 *ibid*

Moore also notes the importance of social and physical environments and access to material basic needs in the family environment. He highlights the power of integrated child and family centres or hubs as central places for social connection, development and learning environments, and integrated service access. Moore also notes that just as cumulative trauma is recognised as impacting children, a focus on the cumulative benefits of positive experiences and conditions should be a new reframing for policy and practice.⁷⁸

When the full CG Approach is implemented, the core conditions identified by research and evidence for optimising child and family wellbeing are in place, with many being successfully embedded throughout the evaluation period.

Implementation of principle 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' improved within the resources available, with all five of the Children's Ground integrated platform areas strengthened over the period. Constrained resourcing impacted the extent of delivery.

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that children and families experienced improved equity in access to services with increased engagement in preventative health promotion and early intervention. This is central to the core conditions outlined in western evidence bases as being required for children and families to enjoy positive life experiences and to flourish.

Access and engagement were also enabled by the flexible delivery model, which means that, when people are experiencing multiple and complex needs, their most pressing needs can be responded to on any given day, and that support can be provided where people are and in places where they are comfortable.

78 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>.

This is supported by findings and recommendations from western research evidence and national inquiries in relation to service design for children and families living with complex intergenerational inequity and disadvantage.^{79 80 81}

Evaluation evidence has shown that the deliberate flexibility of the CG Approach enabled Children's Ground to reduce service access barriers for children and families, increasing access to and engagement in prevention and early intervention.

However, ongoing improvements, and in-community infrastructure access is required, to achieve a fully integrated and accessible system. The challenges experienced with establishing in-community, place-based delivery will continue to impact progress.

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

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

81 Barnes, J; Katz, IB; Korbin, JE; O'Brien, M. 2006. Children and Families in Communities: Theory, Research, Policy and Practice. Chichester, East Sussex: John Wiley and Sons.

SUMMARY

In the context of the national and international evidence and research, the CG Approach, as implemented through the ten principles, provides a comprehensive suite of conditions recognised as critical to positive change. These principles on their own are important, and together provide a service system framework that, if implemented fully, offers an exciting policy and practice framework for systems reform.

The positive development and outcomes over the period have been notable given the context of resource constraints, the challenges of COVID-19, and with families and communities continuing to experience ongoing grief and loss and other persistent stressors.

Children's Ground has successfully established a system that is led by local people and designed to meet the complex needs of First Nations communities.

It places children and families in the centre of the service system, uplifts local talent, is integrated and holistic, centres culture and works across a number of inter-related measures to provide a responsive and accessible system of services where people live. Over the evaluation period, engagement, governance, local employment and empowerment all were strengthened.

The CG Approach is a transformational reform in service system design, access and empowerment with First Nations people. The ten principles have worked together to create important improvements in access, equity and engagement. Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has established important enabling and empowering processes as key conditions for change over the long-term.



4.4: IMPACT EVALUATION

As a whole of community approach, Children's Ground is tracking change and impact for children, families and communities, recognising that addressing complex injustice and disadvantage requires change at all levels to achieve positive long-term outcomes.

Children's Ground has a 25-year longitudinal evaluation with ten high-level outcomes and associated progress indicators to monitor achievement of these outcomes over time (see Figure 18 for progress measures relevant to this evaluation period and Appendix 3 for the full detailed evaluation framework and progress indicators).

Note: In 2022, the family level outcome of 'Families are economically and socially strong' was split to become the following two outcomes: 'Families are economically strong'; 'Families are healthy and socially strong'.

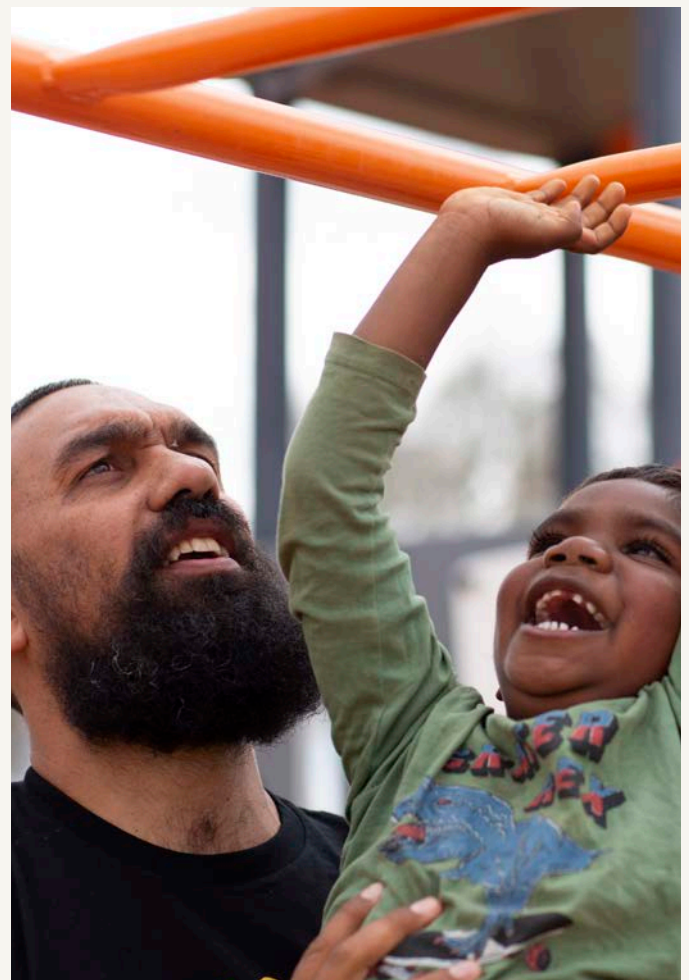
The Evaluation Framework includes short- and medium-term progress indicators as well as long-term outcome measures. The intended progress against these measures requires the investment and implementation of the full CG Approach as a comprehensive intergenerational and integrated suite of services and resources within each community that provides the conditions for change with children, families and whole communities.

Over six years of operations, the full CG Approach has not been operational. As a result, it is not expected that progress will be made against all indicators within the timeframes outlined in the Evaluation Framework.

For the purposes of this second evaluation, primary progress indicators continue to be those identified under Access and Engagement, with some additional progress measures of engagement also included.

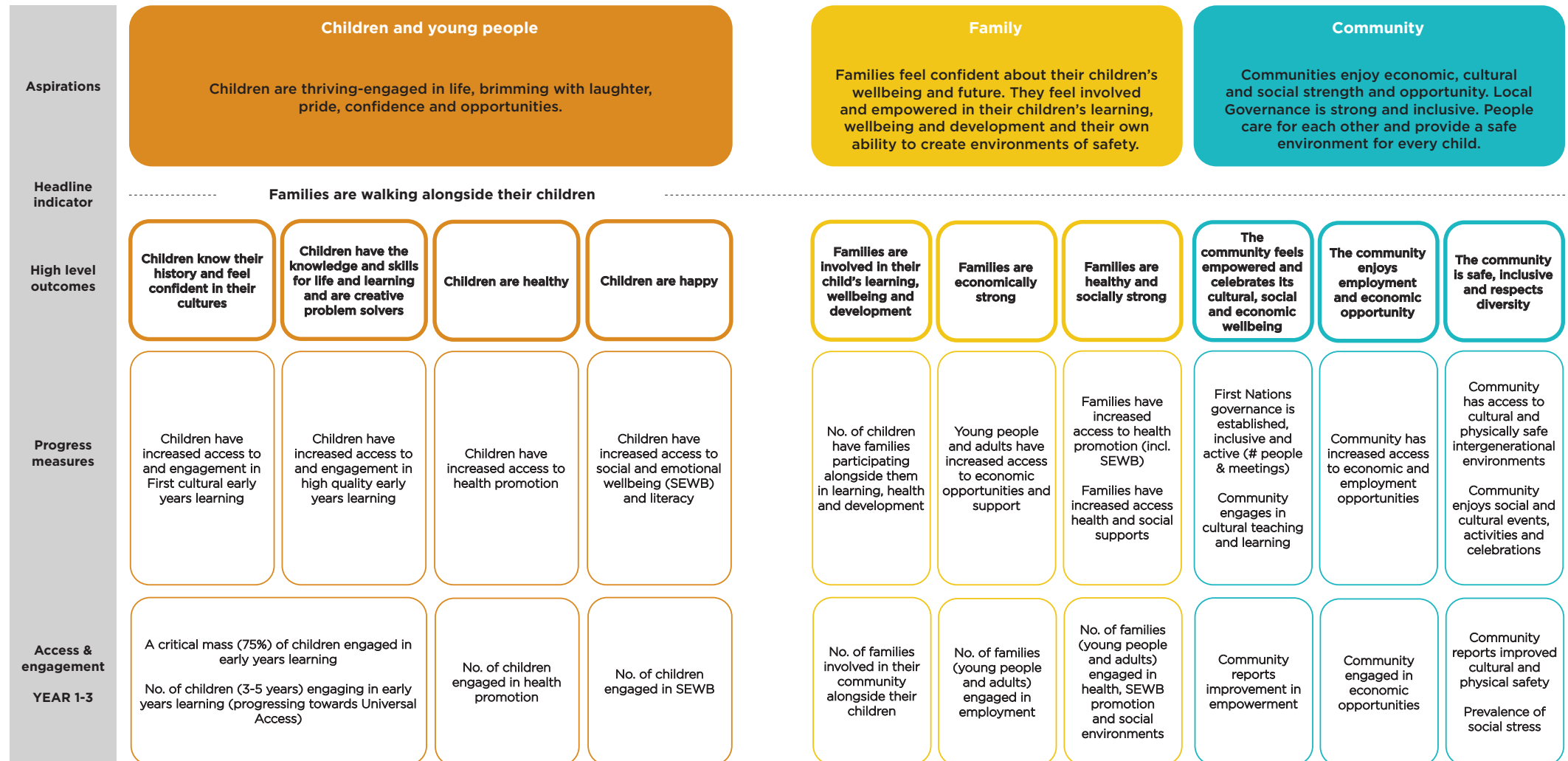
Impact findings should be considered in the context of:

- The full CG Approach not being operational.
- The impact of COVID-19 during the period of the evaluation.
- Children's Ground is working to establish a First Nations-centred system of learning, health, employment and wellbeing for which benchmarking does not exist in the mainstream context.



The following is Children's Ground's evaluation outcomes framework. This presents the key progress indicators for this second evaluation period.

FIGURE 18: CHILDREN'S GROUND EVALUATION OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK



SUMMARY OF IMPACT FINDINGS

This evaluation evidenced that the CG Approach continued to achieve impact for children and families toward key long-term outcomes. In this evaluation period, Children's Ground built on and is starting to consolidate the early-stage and emerging impact evidenced in the first delivery and evaluation of 2017 to 2019.

Key outcomes measures for children, family and community are showing trends towards long-term change. Most noticeable is that children are progressing in their learning and development, as well as their nutrition and health, and wellbeing literacy and agency.

The key condition for change, 'families walking alongside their children', is being achieved for children. Families are showing improved social and cultural connection, health promotion engagement and economic strengthening through employment and financial supports. While whole of community change can only be measured over the long-term, the building blocks of a critical mass of engagement, local governance and reports of improved engagement and wellbeing are all positive developments.

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

**WILLIAM TILMOUTH, ARRERNTJE ELDER,
CHILDREN'S GROUND CO-FOUNDER AND
CHAIR OF BOARD, 2020**



CHANGES FOR CHILDREN		
351 children 0-5 years engaged in early learning, an increase from 223 in 2017 to 2019	68% of children 0-8 years engaged in cultural and western early years learning, an increase from 14% before Children's Ground started	Child engagement doubled in key areas of nutrition, social/emotional wellbeing, healthy routines
Engagement in Learning on Country doubled between evaluation periods	Evidence that children who are strong in cultural learning are stronger in western learning	Children with a parent/carer employed at Children's Ground are stronger on cultural and western learning
CHANGES FOR FAMILIES		
83 First Nations people were employed, an increase from 59 in 2017 to 2019 30% had never worked before and 80% were not working when they started at Children's Ground	519 family members 18+ years have engaged in learning and health promotion alongside their children An increase from 319 in 2017 to 2019	914 family members (young people and adults) engaged in health promotion and support An increase from 487 in 2017 to 2019
92% of families felt there were more activities and opportunities for children and families to spend time together	205 First Nations people engaged in first language and cultural resource development	655 young people and adults engaged with social/emotional wellbeing promotion and support
CHANGES FOR COMMUNITY		
1,415 people engaged in Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe - an increase from 978 in 2017 to 2019		
19 First Nations staff presented at 10 conferences showing national and international leadership	100% of First Nations staff and family members reported that Children's Ground is a safe place	197 First Nations people engaged in regional and community governance
Emerging long-term community findings (quotes from First Nations family/staff members)		
<i>"It makes me really proud for what we are doing today at Children's Ground. It's a safe place. We call Children's Ground apmere [home] again, it's like an apmere for us and for the little ones."</i> 65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023	<i>"We walk with them [the children] step by step by step by step, so they'll never have to experience that life."</i> 35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023	<i>"I want to be here, like as many young mums now, so I would like to become a young leader for Children's Ground, to support them with the little ones."</i> 45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

This evaluation evidenced that centring first language and culture in the design and delivery of the CG Approach led to a significant increase in engagement of children and families across all areas. Supporting a strong cultural identity and connection to country is a protective factor for children and families. Centring culture was a driver of engagement for families.

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that Children's Ground created foundational western and cultural core care conditions for children and families to thrive and flourish over the life-course. For some children and families, this has now been sustained for a six-year period, through children's earliest developmental years. A new norm has emerged for some children and families.

Through sustained delivery, the intention is to embed and see early changes consolidated with a majority and critical mass of children and families across each community. Evaluation evidence suggests that key conditions are being met for impact and change, and that the full CG Approach is required for improved quality, sustainability and extension of impact.

"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**



4.5: IMPACT EVALUATION FINDINGS

CHANGE AND IMPACT FOR CHILDREN

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

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

These reflect the desire of families for their children to be happy, healthy and knowledgeable in their first culture and language, and in western and global knowledge.

At Children's Ground, many children are exposed to, or have experienced, adverse life experiences and stress in their early years due to intergenerational socio-economic injustice. It is well known that there is a relationship between adverse early childhood experiences and future outcomes in education and employment.^{82 83 84 85}

The 2024 Closing the Gap data demonstrates First Nations children still trail far behind non-First Nation children. In the Northern Territory, outcomes have worsened for children in key areas of health, development and education.⁸⁶ However, First Nations children are also surrounded by protective cultural strengths and contexts, which are critical foundations for their early and life-long identity, learning, health and wellbeing.^{87 88}

The CG Approach is designed to achieve the critical conditions to support a child to flourish,⁸⁹ responding to complex disadvantage and structural racism as well as cultural strength. The CG Approach is also designed to engage families and communities with their health, learning, cultural, economic and social needs as an important enabler for families to support their children.

82 OECD. 2017. Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris.

83 Strathearn, L; Giannotti, M; Mills, R; Kisely, S; Najman, J; Abajobir, A. 2020. Long-term Cognitive, Psychological, and Health Outcomes Associated With Child Abuse and Neglect. *Paediatrics*. Oct;146(4).

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

85 Jiang, S; Postovit, L; Cattaneo, A; Binder, EB; Aitchison KJ. 2019. Epigenetic Modifications in Stress Response Genes Associated With Childhood Trauma. *Front. Psychiatry* 10:808.

86 Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Bremner, J. D., Walker, J. D., Whitfield, C., Perry, B. D., Dube, S. R., & Giles, W. H.. 2006. The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood. A convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology. *European archives of psychiatry and clinical neuroscience*, 256(3), 174–186.

87 Kelly, K; Dudgeon, P; Gee, G; Glaskin, B. 2009. Living on the Edge: Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Risk and Protective Factors for Serious Psychological Distress among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Discussion Paper No. 10, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin.

88 Anderson, P; Bamblett, M; Bessarab, D; Bromfield, L; Chan, S; Maddock, G; Menzies, K; O'Connell, M; Pearson, G; Walker, R; Wright, M. 2017. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and child sexual abuse in institutional settings. Report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Sydney.

89 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>.

This section presents evaluation data against the progress indicators for the four outcomes for children:

- **OUTCOME 1:** Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers.
- **OUTCOME 2:** Children know their history and feel confident in their culture.
- **OUTCOME 3 & 4:** Children are healthy (3) and happy (4).

Each of the four outcomes areas for 'Change and impact for children' is presented with key findings, an introductory context, followed by evaluation evidence and findings against each of the progress indicators for the outcome area. Findings include key quantitative data as well as qualitative data in the form of quotes from First Nations staff and family members and local services.

CHILDREN HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS FOR LIFE AND LEARNING AND ARE CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVERS

KEY FINDINGS:

- 57% increase in the number of children aged 0-5 engaged in early learning – an increase from 223 children in 2017 to 2019 to 351 in 2020 to 2022.
- A new and ongoing cohort of children (0-8 years) engaged in early learning – before Children's Ground, 14% of children were engaging in early learning, increasing to 68% since Children's Ground started (from 2017 to 2022).
- Children who are strong in cultural learning are stronger in western learning.
- Children with a parent/carer employed at Children's Ground are stronger on cultural and western learning.

"When taught first in their own languages, children learn better, are more self-confident and transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to additional languages... Children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are much more likely to experience frustration and failure, resulting in higher dropout rates for these children".⁹⁰

UNITED NATIONS, 2012

⁹⁰ UNESCO. 2012. Why language matters for the Millennium Development Goals. UNESCO Office Bangkok and Regional Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific. ISBN: 978-92-9223-387-7.

Children's Ground's Learning & Wellbeing framework covers child development, wellbeing and learning from (pre)birth to eight years of age, recognising this is the critical developmental period. It is an intergenerational model that focuses on children, their family and the communities in which they live. It covers each child's social, cultural, cognitive, creative, physical and emotional development – through first cultural and English/western learning skills and knowledge.

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

In the full CG Approach, Learning & Wellbeing delivery is year-round with extended hours learning after hours, on weekends and during school holidays.

Figure 19 shows the three types and levels of learning engagement at Children's Ground.

FIGURE 19: TYPES OF LEARNING AT CHILDREN'S GROUND



The first inner circle level represents formal learning and consists of engagement in a structured learning environment of early years and primary learning (cultural and western learning).

The second level represents extended hours learning, which includes after school and school holiday learning. This extends the hours in which learning can occur and provides children with extracurricular opportunities that promote skills development and learning in other domains (e.g. sport, arts, music).

The third level, informal learning, includes Children's Ground activities that provide an environment for social and cultural development and wellbeing, and skills and knowledge acquisition through community events including camps and intergenerational gatherings.

Together, all three levels provide different entry points and opportunities for engagement in learning and builds a culture of learning that is valued and present across the community. The focus on learning and wellbeing for children also strengthens the social and cultural capital in the community.

This section presents evaluation findings and evidence around the extent to which Children's Ground achieved increased access to and engagement in formal early learning – the inner circle from Figure 19. Data is presented across two age groups: 0-5 years and 6-8 years. Engagement in informal learning environments is presented later in section 'Change and impact for families'.

If the full CG Approach had been delivered throughout this period, this evaluation would have reported on children aged 0-11 years covering early years and primary-aged learning delivery. However, as Children's Ground has not yet extended formally into primary aged delivery, this evaluation focuses on the early years.



Formal early learning and wellbeing

PROGRESS MEASURES:

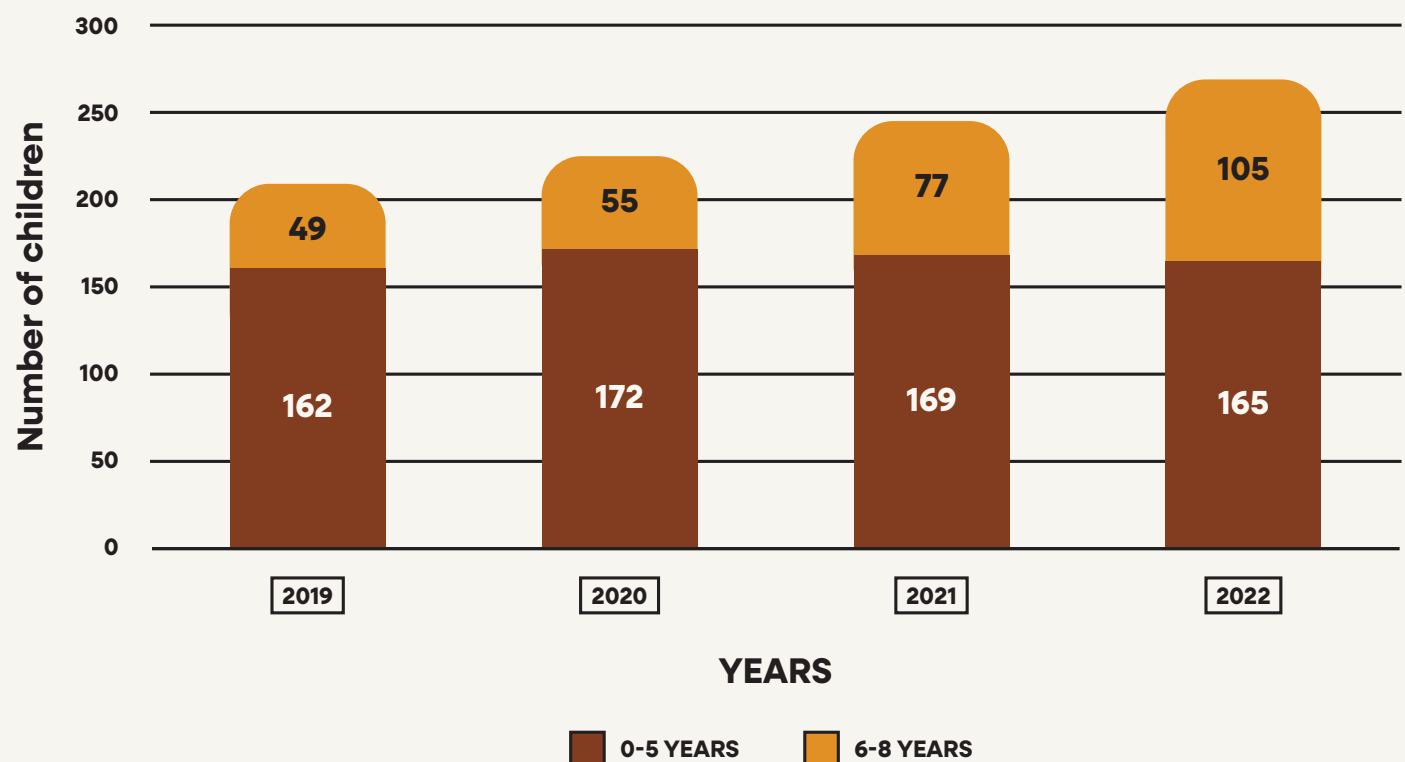
- Children have increased access to early years learning.
- Number of children accessing high quality early years learning.

At the time of Children's Ground commencing operations in 2017, only 14% of children had experienced any engagement in early years learning and of these, for most, this was irregular and ad hoc engagement. Before Children's Ground, one community had no access to services due to remoteness and no communities leading the CG Approach had access to culturally-designed early years services.

From 2020 to 2022, 351 children 0-5 years engaged in early learning, an increase from 223 in 2017 to 2019. From 2020 to 2022, a further 106 children aged 6-8 years engaged in early learning.

Graph 7 shows the number of unique children aged 0-8 years⁹¹ engaged in Learning & Wellbeing with Children's Ground over this second evaluation period, including 2019 from the first evaluation period to demonstrate growth.

GRAPH 7: NUMBER OF CHILDREN AGED 0-8 YEARS ENGAGED IN LEARNING & WELLBEING WITH CHILDREN'S GROUND FROM 2020 TO 2022, BY YEAR



⁹¹ For Children's Ground and western evidence bases, 'early childhood' spans the first eight years of a child's development, learning and wellbeing. Recognising that Children's Ground does not currently deliver a formal mainstream primary school learning curriculum, children aged 6-8 years are not encouraged to attend Children's Ground's early learning. Where possible, children are supported to engage with mainstream primary schools. However, at times older children do attend with their family due to a range of reasons.

Children's Ground continued to create access to formal early learning in four communities despite COVID-19 and other challenges. Throughout the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019), the number of children engaged increased year-on-year as resources and delivery increased. During this evaluation period, engagement remained relatively consistent across each year.

The leveling out of engagement is likely due to Children's Ground increasing broad reach across the population within communities. Engagement of children aged 6-8 years increased, which may have been an impact of children of school age having less engagement

in school during COVID-19, and/or children growing up through early years of Children's Ground continuing to engage.

First Nations teaching and learning policies and practices require children to engage in learning alongside their family. Therefore, 100% of children (aged 0-8 years) engaged in early learning alongside their family, including parents, grandparents, siblings, aunties and other family members.



PROGRESS MEASURE:

- A critical mass (75%) of children (0-8 years) engaged in early years learning.

Based on internal population mapping with each Children's Ground community and internal participation data, from 2017 to 2022 68% of children 0-8 years engaged in early learning with Children's Ground. This did not reach the intended critical mass of 75%. However, the actual numbers of children engaged increased between periods.

To put this in context, the baseline at the beginning of Children's Ground was only 14% of children had previously engaged in early years learning, therefore 68% of engagement remains a significant increase in participation.

During the period, 74% of children aged 4-5 years engaged in early years learning, almost reaching a critical mass. This is a noticeable achievement in the context of publicly available data which shows that in 2022, 31% of Aboriginal children aged 4-5 years living in Alice Springs Town Camps attended a preschool program, this increased to 35% when excluding Town Camps⁹².

In the 2017-2019 evaluation period 82% of children aged 0-8 years engaged in early learning. The larger population and denominator contributed to the decrease in the percentage of engagement, as did the reduced reach and engagement opportunities as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and illness. Some children and families only had an opportunity to engage in health and wellbeing support, with learning being delivered in small family groups during the period of restrictions.

In contrast to learning engagement, throughout this evaluation period, 73% of children aged 0-8 years engaged in universal and targeted health and wellbeing promotion and support. Not being fully place-based in community also impacted engagement of a critical mass of children and families.

This evidence suggests that, despite challenges and disruptions, Children's Ground is comparatively continuing to achieve high levels of engagement in contrast to local mainstream data trends (noting that Children's Ground's early years learning engagement is not included in the PHIDU data).



⁹² 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-socialhealthatlas-of-australia-indigenous-areas>. Geography: Alice Springs. Year: 2022.

PROGRESS MEASURE:

- Number of children (3-5 years) engaging in early years learning – progressing towards Universal Access levels (see footnote 86).

During this evaluation period, 168 children aged 3-5 years engaged in early learning with Children's Ground – a slight increase from 145 in the first evaluation period. No children engaged at Universal Access levels across the full course of the year.⁹³

Children's Ground continues to work towards increasing delivery to support children to engage in Universal Access. However, insufficient resources (vehicles and staff) as well as the additional support some families need to regularly engage in learning, currently makes Universal Access difficult to achieve.

Further, Children's Ground's implementation experience in all regions shows that service offerings need to be available daily and during extended hours to be able to engage kids in early learning at Universal Access levels. This is due to the significant disruptions in the lives of children and families that can impact regular daily engagement including extreme weather, sorry business, ill-health, overcrowding and family stress. An extended service offering provides equity in access by enabling increased opportunities for families to engage when they can.

While Universal Access is yet to be achieved, a significant change has been regular weekly delivery in each community, which established access to and engagement in early years learning as a new norm and part of family and community life. This has been embedded through delivery in this second evaluation period.



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

Children's progress with cultural and western learning and wellbeing

PROGRESS MEASURE:

- Children are meeting or exceeding cultural and western learning milestones.

Note: Progress is not expected until Year 7 (and beyond) of CG Approach

The Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye learning and curriculum framework was written by Arrernte Elders and educationalists. It was developed with consideration of the National Early Years Learning Framework. The Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye framework was used to develop Children's Ground's Child Learning & Wellbeing tool, titled '*Nthakenhe ampe akweke akaltye-irreme*' (How our little children learn).

See Appendix 7 for details about the development, piloting and validation of the Child Learning & Wellbeing tool.⁹⁴

The Child Learning & Wellbeing tool is used to track child progress across cultural and western learning and wellbeing domains of First Nations children aged 3-7 years. Data collection for this evaluation was undertaken by educators (First Nations and western-trained) in May 2023.

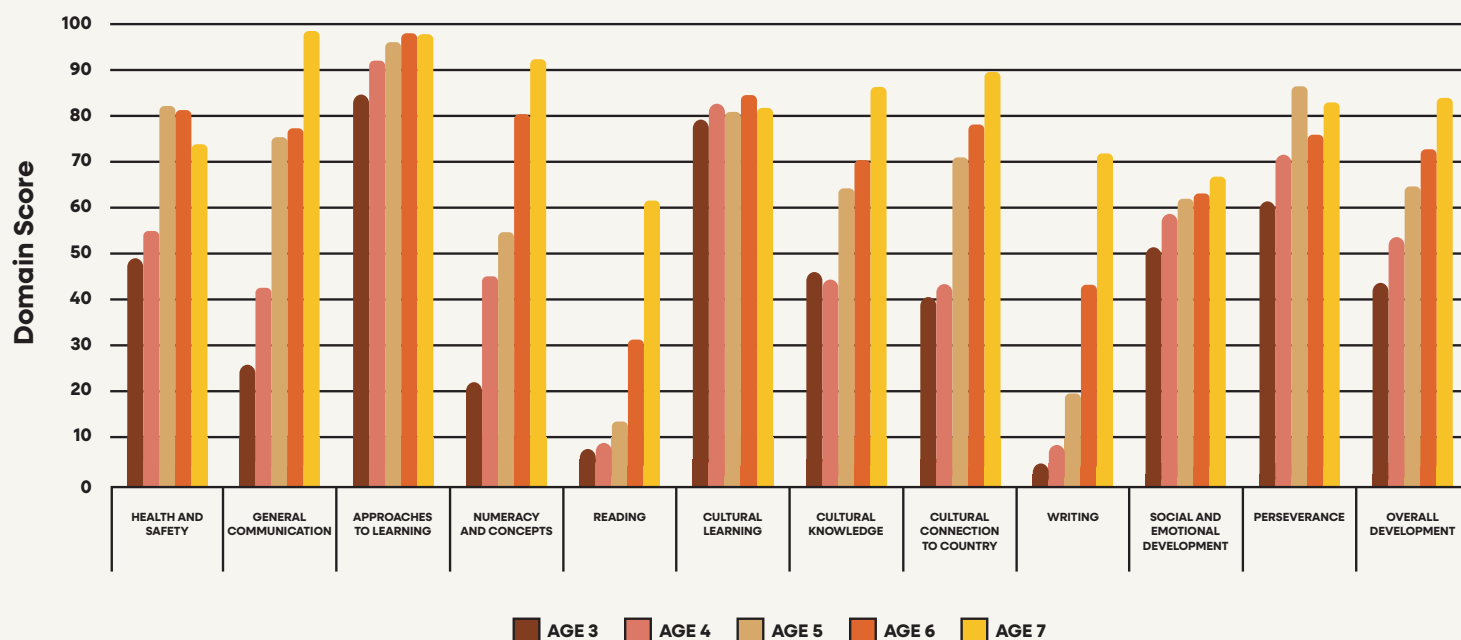


⁹⁴ Note: Due to changes in the tool, progress data cannot be compared between the first and second evaluation periods. Going forward, Children's Ground will be using the same tool and can present progress over time across future evaluation periods.

This section presents data collected using the Child Learning & Wellbeing development tool.

Graph 8 below presents child learning and developmental progress against a range of cultural and western learning domains by age, including an 'overall development' domain.

GRAPH 8: CHILD LEARNING AND WELLBEING PROGRESS - DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAIN SCORES, BY CHILDREN'S AGE



This data shows that, as children become older, they are progressing against key developmental areas, as determined by western and cultural educators.

Key areas of strength across all ages include approaches to learning, cultural learning and perseverance. These domains are important foundations for life-long learning.

Development in general communication, numeracy, literacy, writing and cultural knowledge all showed dramatic improvements with age. This includes reading and writing in both English and Aboriginal languages.

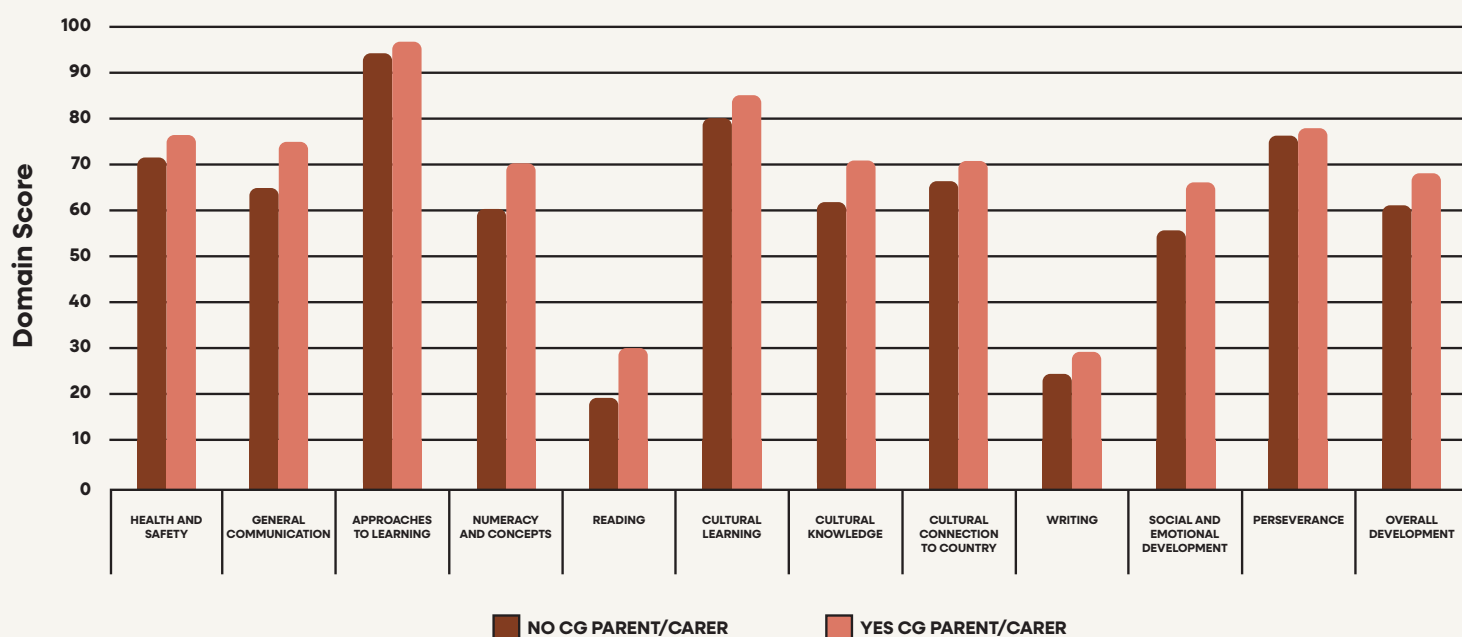
For all age groups, reading and writing, while showing improvement with age, were the areas requiring significant improvement. This is a learning domain where Children's Ground needs to continue working with children of all ages and their families.

Social/Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) data is moderate. The fact that SEWB is sitting at a mid-level rather than high may reflect children living in stress in communities where people continue to experience poor housing, overcrowding, intergenerational and compound trauma, poverty, inequity and disadvantage due to the impact of colonisation.

This domain is considered critical and is deliberately embedded in early learning, to support the development of SEWB literacy and skills from an early age, through developmental stages into teenhood and adulthood.

The following graph presents child learning and wellbeing progress data by children who have a parent/carer employed with Children's Ground and those who do not.

GRAPH 9: CHILD LEARNING AND WELLBEING PROGRESS - DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAIN SCORES, BY CHILDREN'S GROUND PARENT/CARER

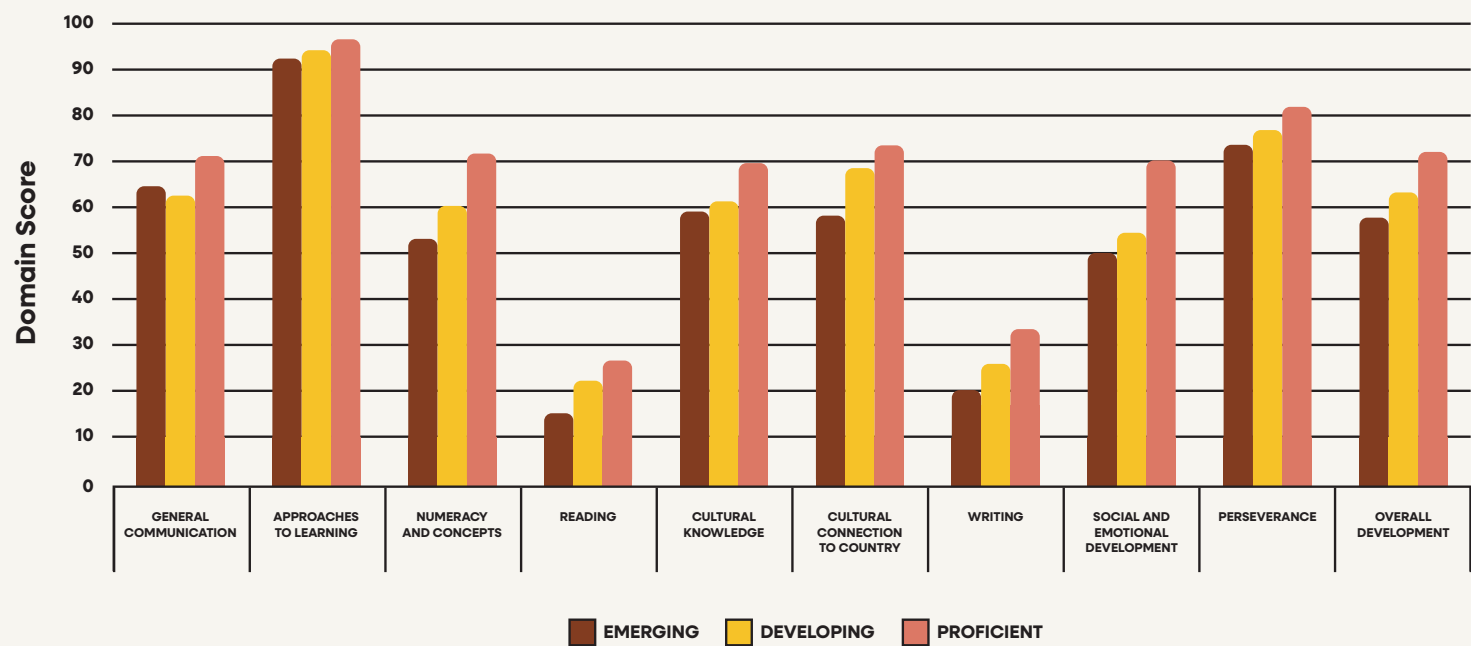


This data shows that children who have a parent/carer employed with Children's Ground are progressing further in their learning and wellbeing on key developmental domains of literacy, numeracy, communication, social/emotional wellbeing and cultural learning domains, compared with children who do not have a parent/carer working at Children's Ground.

The final graph presents data by children's cultural learning. It shows how children who are either emerging, developing or proficient in their cultural learning are progressing across other domains.



GRAPH 10: CHILD LEARNING AND WELLBEING PROGRESS - DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAIN SCORES, BY CULTURAL LEARNING



This data demonstrates that that children who are progressing well in their cultural learning are further developed in key developmental domains of western learning (reading and writing), general communication, social/emotional wellbeing and perseverance and in their overall development.

One First Nations staff/family member reported that:

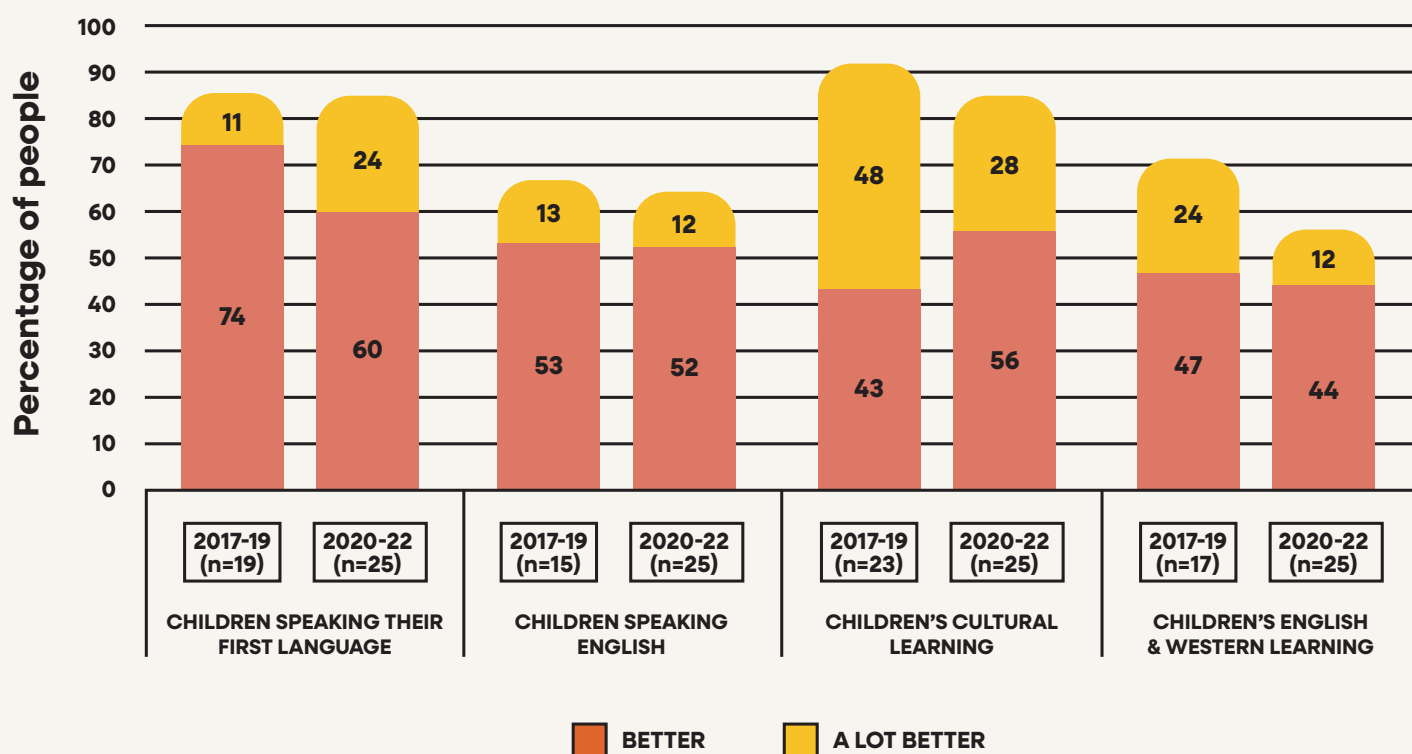
“Children’s Ground was developed because there wasn’t any language and cultural happening in schools any more... We are teaching language and culture side by side with western but it’s just as important if not more. And to be strong in western you’ve got to be strong in your culture and language, cultural knowledge, and language.”

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/ FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

In addition to educators collecting data about children’s learning and wellbeing, broader First Nations staff and family members were also asked to report how they felt children’s learning and wellbeing was progressing. They were asked to think about how children’s learning is going now, compared to the previous evaluation period. Graph 11 shows their responses.



GRAPH 11: FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN'S LEARNING



This data shows that, between the two evaluation periods, First Nations staff and families consistently reported that children's cultural and western learning is improving since Children's Ground started. There has not been a notable increase reported between the periods.

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members, people reported changes for children in their early learning access, engagement and progress. They also noted that Children's Ground had created school readiness and enabled children to progress into primary aged learning with confidence.

"It's going good. Because they're [children] feeling more confidence with their families here."

20-30 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"The whole thing is that they are learning. And they're picking up things before they go to school. They're learning so much from Children's Ground at a young age."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"We help them to read, and we would ask them what they actually want to do when they read, and they can point out the things and we can help them say things. As an educator we can help our kids learn more in Children's Ground."

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“But some little kids that been to Children’s Ground, they were confident in being in a classroom [when they went to mainstream school]. They were little role models for other little kids that was there, that never came to Children’s Ground.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“I saw that childcare was good, but it didn’t really work out for the kids. But when I came across Children’s Ground we stayed longer and longer and longer, that’s how the kids started learning and learning.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“I’ve seen a lot of kids who never went to school, you know, like, coming to Children’s Ground, then this year it’s been a big change, they’ve started enrolling their kids in western school, and that education. You know, that’s a big change, like all the kids who didn’t use to go to school, they go to school now.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground consolidated access to and engagement in formal early learning and wellbeing in four communities where historical engagement and access was low or did not exist.

While the number of children engaged remained relatively consistent between evaluation periods, data indicates that new cohorts of children are engaging and children who began with Children's Ground from 2017 to 2019 continue to engage in further learning, health and other activities.

Engagement of a critical mass of children at Universal Access levels was not achieved. However, evidence demonstrates that regular weekly delivery in each community established access to and engagement in early years learning as a part of everyday life.

Engagement in early learning grew over a six-year period and has been sustained through serious disruptions of COVID-19. Universal Access is expected when the full CG Approach and service offering is available in each community. This will allow an extended and flexible offering adapted to the weather and other conditions, supporting children and families impacted by sorry business, health issues and other family stressors and disruptions that occur on a daily basis.

Child learning and wellbeing progress data shows that children are developing in both cultural and western learning, and that children who are strong in their cultural learning are stronger in their reading, writing, communication, social/emotional wellbeing, perseverance and overall development.

This data also showed that children with a parent/carer employed by Children's Ground were further developed in their learning and wellbeing across multiple developmental domains.

Evaluation evidence in this section and presented throughout the process section demonstrates that design and policies developed by First Nations leaders enabled children to effectively engage in cultural and western learning within culturally centred environments, alongside their family. This was also enabled by the increasing longevity of the CG Approach. Six years of ongoing delivery with consistent local First Nations educators also contributed to high levels of child and family engagement and confidence in delivery.



CHILDREN KNOW THEIR HISTORY AND FEEL CONFIDENT IN THEIR CULTURE

KEY FINDINGS:

- Engagement in Learning on Country doubled between evaluation periods, increasing from 137 children 0-8 years in 2017 to 2019 to 351 in 2020 to 2022 – before Children’s Ground’s culturally centred early learning services operating consistently within communities and on country were not available.
- 100% of children engaged in cultural learning alongside and led by their family.
- 84% of staff/family members reported children’s first language and cultural learning has improved since starting with Children’s Ground.

“We’ve got our own curriculum that we teach from the ground. In the white man system, you learn from the top. But ours we learn from the bottom.”

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

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

In Australia, there are no legislative or policy frameworks that reflect First Nations rights to *“...establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”*⁹⁵

Children’s Ground seeks to provide the space for Elders and cultural leaders to revitalise and re-establish First Nations learning systems. Elders highlighted the importance of maintaining and strengthening first language as a key foundation to understanding cultural knowledge systems. This is consistent with Article 14 within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁹⁶ There is also a body of international evidence that indicates that education through first language and culture are critical to educational success.^{97 98 99 100}

Children’s Ground’s First Nations Elders and leaders consistently promote a First Nations learning approach and identify the importance of first languages and children developing a strong connection to their culture and country as central to this system.

95 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 14. 2007.

96 *ibid.*

97 Turner, MK; Children’s Ground. 2023. *Apmerengentyele. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia.*

98 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.*

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

100 UNESCO. 2012. *Why Languages Matter for the Millennium Development Goals; UNESCO Bangkok Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.*



First Nations learning systems are leading practice and underpin the health, social, emotional and educational wellbeing of children and young people. These systems integrate knowledge, practice, law, health, creative thinking and practice, ways of being, ethics and social and environmental responsibility, and connection.

First Nations learning environments are intergenerational, experiential and involve listening, watching and doing. Knowledge is not taught in subject streams, but integrated and relational. Instructional-based learning rarely exists on its own as a primary mode of teaching in a First Nations learning system. How knowledge is translated into practice is constantly assessed. Knowledge is not an end game, it is how knowledge is understood and practiced in the context of society, roles and responsibilities that is critical.

“Our teaching connects to our law, our people, our land, our history and our future. We don’t just teach knowledge; we teach how to be in the world. We teach about our roles and responsibilities to each other and the land.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Turner, MK; Children’s Ground. 2023. Apmerengentyele. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia.

“We’ve got our own language and teaching standards in our own ways for our children. Every nation of people have got their own teaching methods and qualifications. We teach by our own knowledge and our own training with our own minds in our own homeland.”

DR M.K. TURNER, OAM, ARRERNTJE PROFESSOR, ELDER AND LAW WOMAN, AMPE-KENHE AHELHE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN’S GROUND

Invasion and colonisation disrupted and dislocated many First Nations people from their traditional lands, interrupting the foundations of systems of law, society, knowledge, education and health systems. In Central Australia, all Children’s Ground communities report they continue to experience barriers to spending time on their country. Dislocation from country impacts systems of learning, health, governance and knowledge. First Nations Elders consistently raised the risk of losing and weakening language and culture and the need for addressing this to be the ultimate priority. Community members have reported their worries about the loss of their first language and culture.

“I am very worried [about culture getting weak]. Because we need to learn our grandmothers’ songs and keep it and keep learning them, because otherwise we’re going to lose it all.”

50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/ FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“One thing I’m sort of worried about, that culture, because we got to keep that strong. You know, so what are we going to do without it? That’s the big thing for us.”

20-30 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/ FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“We’ve got to keep going, because that’s our language and spirit for our kids to be learning, so they can always be learning. Because we don’t want to lose our children and identity and all that.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Children’s Ground’s Learning and Wellbeing framework centres learning on country as a weekly activity to continue systems of land-based learning, teaching, and transmission. First Nations learning systems are intergenerational and guided by kinship, practices and laws connected to country.

“Well, we take the little ones out on Country, we show them my side of the Country. And before we go to Country we introduce the little ones to that apmere [country] and they can say to that apmere like saying you belong to that apmere like my grandchildren. And my grandchildren have children as well... When they take the kids out they still introduce the little ones for that Country so that they can be safe and they won’t get sick, and they’ll come back as happy little ones then. Not sick, they’ll be alright because they’re the ones that are looking after them. Apmere is looking after the little ones, so they don’t get sick. Apmere, they’re always guiding us, apmere will be there all the time.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“We help the kids to learn, we help the kids to listen to our language so they can, you know, follow our language when we speak in language to them. Because it’s important for them, because they’re Aboriginal, they need to have their own culture, they need to have their own language, they need to have their own support from their family.”

**20-30 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

The evidence shows that delivering education through a child’s first language and culture will result in: increased access; engagement and equity; improved learning outcomes; reduced dropout rates; sociocultural benefits; economic benefits; lower overall costs.^{102 103 104}

“When people’s freedom to use their language is not guaranteed, this limits their freedom of thought, freedom of opinion and expression, including artistic expression, as well as their access to education, health and information, justice, decent employment, their participation in cultural life, and other rights”.¹⁰⁵

“When taught first in their own languages, children learn better, are more self-confident and are well equipped to transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to additional languages”.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Bender, P; Dutcher, N; Klaus, D; Shore, J; Tesar, C. 2005. In Their Own Language: Education for All. Education Notes. World Bank, Washington, DC.

¹⁰³ Turner, MK; Children’s Ground. 2023. Apmeregentyele. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia.

¹⁰⁴ 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.

¹⁰⁵ UNESCO. 2021. Global action plan of the international decade of indigenous languages (IDIL2022-2032).

¹⁰⁶ UNESCO. 2012. Why Languages Matter for the Millennium Development Goals; UNESCO Bangkok Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education.

PROGRESS MEASURES:

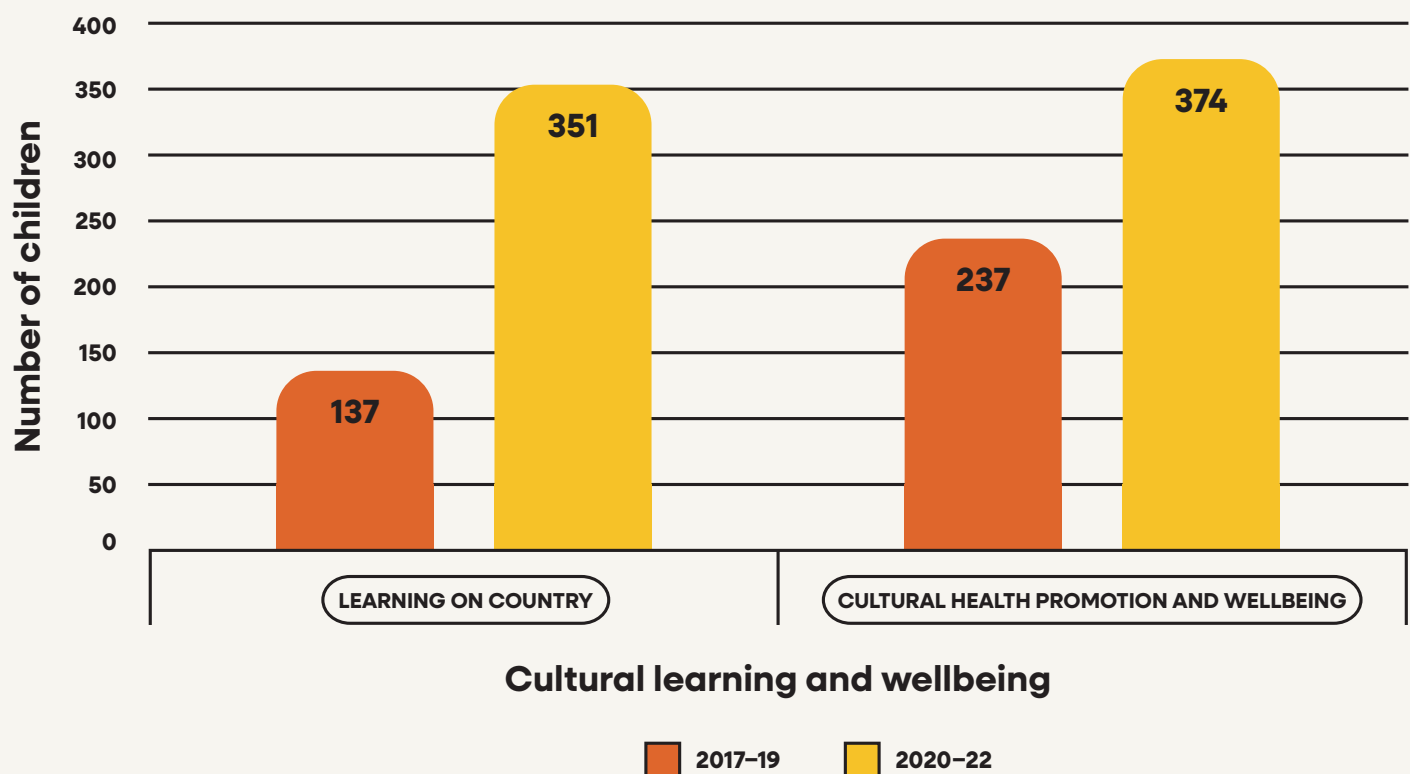
- Children have increased access to first cultural early years learning.
- Number of children engaged in first cultural early years learning.

From 2020 to 2022:

- Learning on Country was delivered on 606 occasions, an increase from 321 across 2017 to 2019.
- On average, over the three years, 58% of early learning delivery occurred on country, an increase from 48% from 2017 to 2019.
- Cultural health promotion was delivered through early learning sessions on 503 occasions, an increase from 220 in 2017 to 2019. This included bush baths, baby smoking ceremonies, collecting and preparing bush food and medicine and conversations about uses and benefits and learning about traditional cultural practices.
- All children who participated in early learning with Children's Ground engaged in intergenerational cultural learning alongside and led by their family.

Graph 12 shows the number of children 0-8 years who engaged in cultural learning and health promotion with Children's Ground.

GRAPH 12: NUMBER OF CHILDREN 0-8 YEARS WHO ENGAGED IN CULTURAL LEARNING AND WELLBEING WITH CHILDREN'S GROUND



Between the two evaluation periods, there has been an increase in the number of children engaged in cultural learning and health promotion. The number of children engaged in Learning on Country has doubled between evaluation periods.

This is consistent with the increased delivery of Learning on Country noted previously. It is also likely due to challenges experienced with place-based delivery in communities and increased on-country delivery during COVID-19 bio-security zones when families relocated out of town to live on homelands. Coupled with increased funding in this second evaluation period, these led to increased delivery of and engagement in Learning on Country and cultural health promotion.

As reported in the previous child learning section – 84% of First Nations staff/family members reported children's first language and cultural learning has improved since starting with Children's Ground. This was supported by interview data from First Nations staff/family members.

"They [children] know where they come from. They know who they are, through kinship and where your parents are from. Pronouncing the [Arrernte] words aren't very hard for them now."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"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, etc... 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."

"It's really eye-catching, I can say that, because I never seen anything like this before."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"They never used to hear the language. Now the Children's Ground's been teaching Arrernte and taking them out bush, now they are little Arrernte people. They sing in Arrernte instead of whitefella songs... they got their own songs, we make it in Arrernte for them."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"They're really good at it [speaking Arrernte]. They know. They know their skin name as well. When we call out their skin name they can tell their skin name."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"With Children's Ground... you're going to learn a lot and you're going to be on Country a lot."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"That's the next generation... there with their grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles and aunties."

**50-60 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Strengthening the connection to culture across generations was identified as a priority by Children's Ground Elders. While it is important for children to learn through language and culture, the expertise within adults has diminished due to colonisation and forced assimilation practices. For children to learn, cultural and language educators also need to strengthen their expertise and knowledge to support intergenerational transmission and quality cultural learning.

In evaluation interviews, people noted that young people and adults are learning first language and culture alongside children during early learning sessions. The intergenerational early learning environments were identified as a safe environment for all generations to learn or advance their cultural and language skills.

Throughout evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members talked about the importance of children, young people and adults learning cultural knowledge and practices as the next generation cultural and community leaders.

"Some adults don't have it [cultural knowledge]. There might be a couple in that group that have that cultural knowledge. And then the other adults that are starting to join in or reconnect are learning. Because as an adult you don't want to be seen asking for help or asking for knowledge because you're at that age where you should know that knowledge. They are learning with the little ones. It's an easy way for adults to learn, by watching them teach kids because then they can just observe and learn."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We have to work with our parents and kids because some of the parents, they don't know. They're still learning as well."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"We work with everyone. You can't just teach one, you have to teach everyone. You have to teach the mother and young mother and their young girl. So, they can learn like mother and child, then mother and child, maternal generations, all of them learning together and then that's how those kids are learning because we're all learning. Because when they learn, they will do it."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"All the young teenage girls, they are learning about country too."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members also identified areas where Children's Ground can continue improving.

"I think we need more Elders to go on the sessions and they need to teach the kids more in their language, talking in their language. I seen some of these First Nations mob not speaking really strong language to the kids. They are using English too much in that session, not talking Arrernte to them."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"They need more curriculum on Arrernte language and like the alphabet and numbers and how to say it in Arrernte and just simple words and pictures... Like we're going out and singing songs and doing stories, that's all right, but more learning to write Arrernte and other languages. They need to learn it to write words."

**35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Some kids are learning, some are too busy playing their own little things instead of sitting in a group and learning more with their mob, with their Elders and First Nations mob. Them Elders that goes with Children's Ground, they should be putting them together and talking and teaching them more."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



SUMMARY

Children's Ground's first evaluation report demonstrated that, for the first time within a formal early learning system, children had regular access to early learning in their first language, about their culture and on their traditional lands. Evidence from this evaluation period shows increased access and increased engagement of children in cultural and on-country learning.

Consistent with the first evaluation, First Nations staff and family members reported children are actively engaging in cultural learning, with the importance of children being and learning on country at the centre of their reports.

Progress and impact were enabled by providing the space and time for First Nations people to lead and govern learning and the CG Approach more broadly.

Progress made in this outcome is the foundation for all learning and wellbeing for children. This was evidenced in the previous outcome where it was demonstrated that the stronger children are in their cultural learning, the stronger they are on other developmental and western learning domains.

Evaluation data evidenced that this is a positive beginning to the long-term, rights-based journey of supporting children to grow up as confident First Nations people with knowledge of and access to first cultural systems and practices alongside, but not compromised or disrupted by western systems.



CHILDREN ARE HEALTHY AND HAPPY

KEY FINDINGS:

- 83% increase in the number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in universal and/or targeted health promotion and wellbeing support, an increase from 256 children in 2017 to 2019 to 468 in 2020 to 2022.
- Child engagement in key areas of health promotion doubled (including nutrition, social/emotional wellbeing, healthy routines).
- 100% of children engaged in western and cultural health promotion integrated into early learning.
- 91% of families reported that children's physical health was better, and 83% reported children's social/emotional wellbeing was better since Children's Ground started.

"I think it [health] has gone better because little ones they look healthy... because some of the kids, when they go back [home], they now want to go wash their hands, brush their teeth. Because they've learned that at Children's Ground."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Australia has a world class health system. Despite this, First Nations people experience alarming health and wellbeing and consistently have the poorest health outcomes and burden of disease irreconcilable with the standards of health and wellbeing experienced by most Australians.¹⁰⁷

Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing framework targets health access, promotion and literacy. Titled *Utnenge, Tyerrtye, Mwerre Atnyenetyeke Iltye Tyerrtye Urrperle-kenhenge* - 'Health in the Hands of the People', in practice the framework takes health outside of clinics and into community. It aims to provide access to high quality, comprehensive and culturally safe health promotion, prevention and early intervention. It aims to create a bridge to existing health services to improve access and equity, and to support individuals and families with primary health care in their management of chronic and acute health conditions. The focus is on delivering health promotion where people live, where they feel empowered, responding to people's lives, cultures and languages.

As detailed in Appendix 2, targeted family health delivery includes health promotion, planning and health support in the following key areas: nutrition, food security, maternal and child health, cultural health, social/emotional wellbeing and environmental health. Early intervention, health literacy and supported access to clinical health occurs across all ages. Public health responses are also undertaken and supported when the need is identified, e.g. COVID-19, scabies outbreaks etc.

¹⁰⁷ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. 2017. Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, AHMAC, Canberra.

Child development, health and wellbeing promotion

For children aged 0-8 years, the family Health & Wellbeing platform aims to build health and wellbeing, health literacy, agency and healthy behaviours from children's earliest years. Child-focused health and wellbeing is always delivered with and alongside their families.

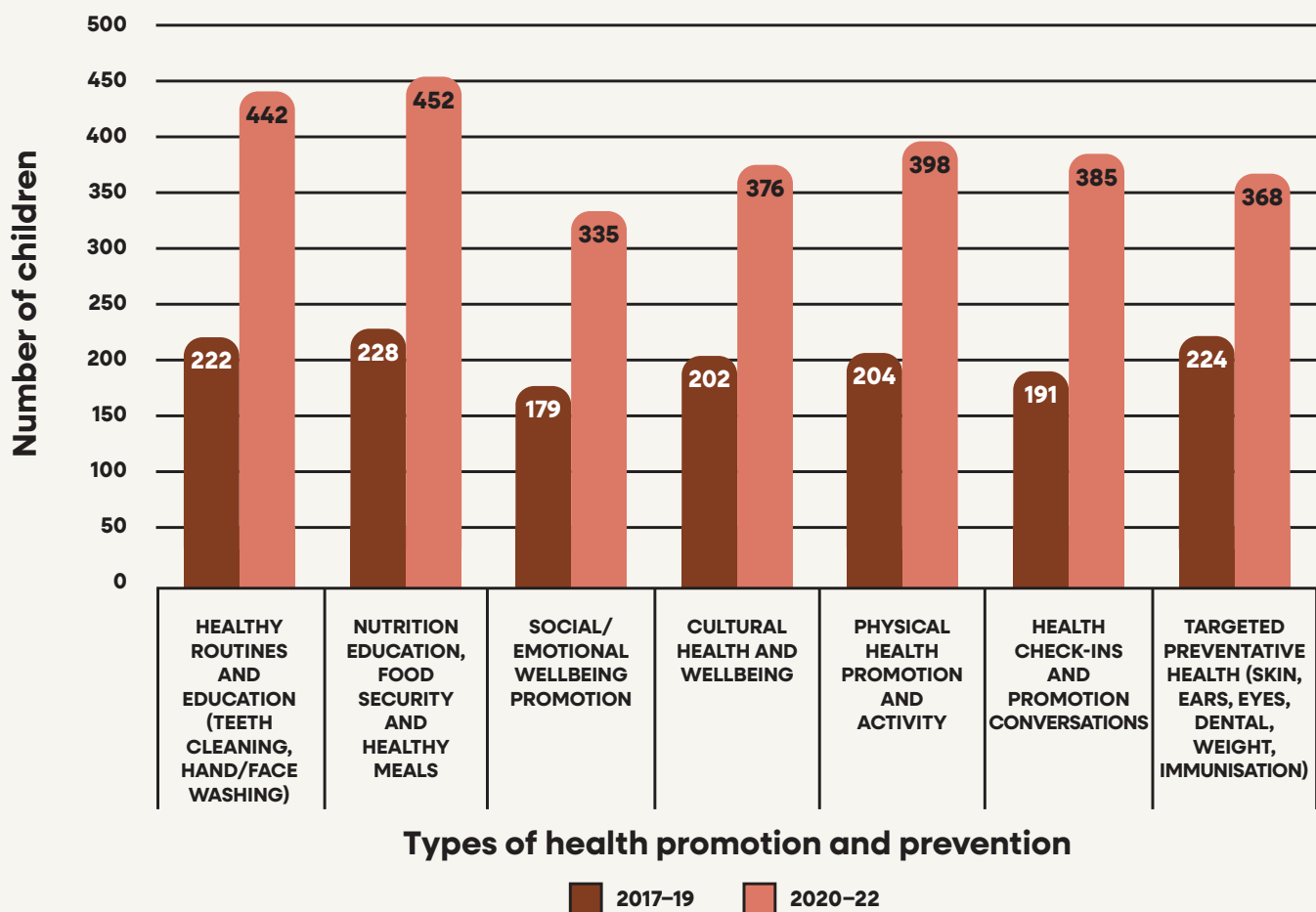
PROGRESS MEASURES:

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

In this evaluation period, 468 children 0-8 years engaged in universal and/or targeted health and wellbeing promotion. This has increased from 256 children engaged throughout the first evaluation period.

The graph below shows the number of children aged 0-8 years engaged in health promotion.

GRAPH 13: NUMBER OF CHILDREN AGED 0-8 YEARS ENGAGED IN HEALTH PROMOTION, BY TYPE, FROM 2020 TO 2022



Increased resources and delivery throughout this evaluation period contributed to a significant increase in child and family engagement in health promotion and support and across all areas of the CG Approach.

Child engagement in health literacy and healthy behaviours doubled through universal delivery integrated into early learning and targeted health promotion and support based on the needs of individuals and families.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members were asked to 'think about children's health now and how it compared to before Children's Ground started':

- 91% of families/staff (n=24) reported that children's physical health (their body and nutrition) was better (58%) or much better (33%). This is consistent with 89% (n=18) reporting improvements in the first evaluation period.
- 83% of families/staff (n=24) reported that children's emotional health (their mind and behaviour) was better (58%) or much better (25%). This is also consistent with reporting in the first evaluation period of 89% (n=19) of families/staff.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members also reported changes in children's health learning, literacy, agency and behaviours. People reported children demonstrating increased healthy behaviours, particularly in relation to learning and enacting preventative hygiene routines at Children's Ground and at home. People observed children looking healthier, particularly their skin, due to regular health checks undertaken by Children's Ground staff and external health providers. Some people talked about health hygiene behaviours translating from Children's Ground and into home environments, but this is not considered as a widespread impact at this early stage.

"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

"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

"When we do health for children, we invite people from services too - tooth fairy, ear checks and all that. Get sores [checked], get nurses to come in."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I see just changes in the little children. I see their skin gets better. When we put out kwatye [water] and soap, and they'll be the first one to run up, wash their little hand, wash their face. They know the routine now."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"Taking hygienic stuff back home too, shampoo. Soap was made. And bush medicine is made, and been given to the family."

50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Maternal and child health

From 2020 to 2022, infants, young children, mothers and whole families (including fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc) engaged with targeted maternal and child health with Children's Ground, as well as targeted and universal health promotion and support more broadly.

The Family Health & Wellbeing team engaged the following number of babies, young children, mothers and family members:

- In targeted maternal and child health – 66 babies (0-1 year); 29 young children (2-3 years) and 206 mothers and family members (18+ years).
- In targeted and universal health promotion and support more broadly (beyond maternal and child health) – 136 babies (0-1 year), 104 young children (2-3 years) and 643 mothers and family members (18+ years).

Maternal and child health support included cultural and western health promotion and responses from pregnancy through to mother and baby health postnatally. Working with sexually active young people is all part of the full CG Approach, however, it is not currently adequately resourced, so is only occurring on an ad hoc basis where possible.

Targeted maternal and child health included supported access to key ante and postnatal age and stage health checks and regular check-ins by Children's Ground's Maternal & Child health, Social/Emotional Wellbeing and Health Promotion staff. The types of targeted maternal and child health delivery are based on mother's and family's individual needs. This included supported access to mother and baby health products and education provided informally through conversation rather than formal parenting programs. This enabled mothers and families to engage in ways they felt comfortable and confident with to share any worries or challenges they experienced.

When health concerns are identified, the Family Health & Wellbeing team support mothers and families to access clinical and specialist health services through referrals and support to engage with services (i.e. making and coordinating appointments, transport, etc).

Furthermore, universal maternal and child health delivery was integrated into early learning sessions and included baby and child smoking ceremonies, bush medicine baths, infant/child nutrition and women sharing stories and teachings about cultural maternal and child health practices. This is in addition to broader health promotion integrated into all learning sessions described earlier.



Nutrition

Nutrition is role modelled across the CG Approach through organisational 'healthy food' policies. A nutritionist and local First Nations nutrition staff work together to ensure learning sessions and activity menus align with nutritional standards.

All children and families engaged in early learning accessed nutritious food. In addition:

- 246 children aged 0-8 years and their families (396 people 18+ years) engaged in conversations/education about nutrition.
- 189 children engaged in preparing nutritious meals and snacks during early learning sessions, alongside 286 family members (2021 to 2022 only when this began being collected).

As part of evaluation data collection, a sample of 28 First Nations staff/family members completed a survey specifically about Children's Ground's nutrition delivery.

- 89% reported children are eating more healthy foods at Children's Ground.
- 86% reported children are eating more healthy foods at home.
- 89% reported children are involved in more conversations about nutrition and learning more about healthy foods, drinks and choices.

In addition to this, in evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and families reported improvements and changes in children's nutritional intake and knowledge and healthy nutrition-related behaviours. Some families also reported that children's learning from Children's Ground translated to improved nutrition in homes. People specifically referred to children learning about nutrition through actively engaging in preparing healthy foods during learning sessions.

"The kids are eating a lot of healthy food when they go on sessions with CG."

"Children and young people are eating healthy here at CG and at home."

"Children are learning [about nutrition] when they're young."

"For our young people it makes their mind think straight."

**FIRST NATIONS STAFF MEMBERS, 2023
(FROM A ONE-OFF ANONYMOUS NUTRITION SURVEY)**

"We talked about sugar... How to keep kids healthy and strong. Because... sugar, it's not really good for the kids. When we have session... we don't have sugar around kids. That's why we're talking about the body and keeping our blood strong."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"When we go out on session there's no cool drinks, lollies, chips, like no junk food and they're eating all the healthy food all the time, what we make at Children's Ground. So, they drink plenty of water now. So, the parents are realising not to have unhealthy food every day."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



Food insecurity continued to impact many children and families, which significantly impacted child nutrition. This emphasises the importance of Children's Ground providing nutritious meals and snacks in all learning sessions, at First Nations Governance and staff meeting days and having nutritious food available for breakfast and lunch when individuals need it, in line with the 'healthy eating' policy.

In this evaluation period, 300 people (of all ages) were supported with food security – this includes the families of 87 children 0-8 years. This is a small contribution to a significant and ongoing challenge that many families live with daily.



Cultural health and wellbeing

The delivery of cultural health and wellbeing grew and matured throughout this evaluation period, with First Nations cultural educators and health specialists integrating important cultural practices into early learning sessions, including regular baby/child smoking ceremonies and bush medicine baths – both are important for children's *utnenge* (spirit), physical and emotional health and safety.

With these practices integrated in learning sessions, children and families become involved in the collection and preparation of bush medicine and smoking plants and are learning the process and importance of these practices from beginning to end.

Consistent with the first evaluation period, First Nations staff and family members continued to refer to the importance of being on country as an important enabler for holistic wellbeing for children and whole families.

*“They’re doing bush medicines, smoking babies, smoking young mums, and cleaning their sores with that same bush medicine. Cleaning our *utnenge* (spirit).”*

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“How I see it, when you go on country, it feels really good and like your spirit is lifting when you go out bush and do your [early learning] sessions out bush. Your spirit is really strong out there instead of having session in town and in the communities where your feeling’s not good... When you go on country and do your sessions, there’s more better. You feel free.”

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Social and emotional wellbeing

Social/Emotional wellbeing is central to holistic delivery across the CG Approach. This acknowledges and works with the current and historical impact of colonisation and resulting intergenerational trauma. The ongoing trauma and daily life stressors experienced by many First Nations children and families manifests in complex ways and impacts the development, learning and wellbeing of children.

During the first evaluation period, Children's Ground identified the serious need for more dedicated Social/Emotional wellbeing practitioner roles due to the significant levels of demand within the community. Throughout this evaluation period, a second Social/Emotional wellbeing counsellor was resourced, dedicated to working with First Nations female staff. This enabled the other full time counsellor to focus on working with children and families universally within early learning and in targeted and responsive ways outside of learning.

As shown previously in Graph 13:

Child engagement in social/emotional wellbeing doubled between the two evaluation periods.

Universal and targeted social/emotional wellbeing continued to include cultural and western approaches. Social/Emotional wellbeing is a deliberate part of the early years learning curriculum to support emotional regulation for children and families as well as social/emotional literacy i.e. learning the language of feelings. For children who may be highly stimulated, hypervigilant or unsettled due to experiencing the impact of trauma, emotional safety and regulation is critical for learning to occur. This is also a good opportunity for role-modelling and family engagement in de-escalating children's behaviour in safe and positive ways. This sees parents and carers learning and engaging in social/emotional wellbeing alongside their children.

As reported earlier, 83% of First Nations staff/family members (n=24) reported that children's emotional health (their mind and behaviour) was better (58%) or much better (25%).

Also in evaluation interviews, it was clear from First Nations staff and family members that social and emotional wellbeing is critical to a child's sense of belonging, identity, safety and connection. These are instilled in learning, through on-country sessions, environments of safety, family engagement and the centring of children's language and culture.

Staff and family members also described changes in children's social/emotional wellbeing. People referred to children seeming more emotionally settled and building on their self-regulation and interactions with other children. People regularly referred to children being happy at Children's Ground. Most people talked about the connection between children's first language and cultural learning, being on country and their strong identity and utnenge (spirit).

"When I first started [at CG] they [children] were scattered (arerte arerte), they were in their own world, sort of thing. Now we've got that language, them songs, you can see the kids, they do the actions now. It helps their mind... Because learning their own language brings their mind back to their self, self-esteem."

50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"Like, when you tell them, 'You've got to be good, you've got to be kind, don't snatch, and, you know, don't do all the wrong things'... They're starting to listen."

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“So we can teach our kids our way of country and how to live on country and how they fit in... things like just their skin name is important. Just their skin name alone, that’s our law and order. Without that, you don’t know how you fit into country or where you fit into the next person’s country because just from your skin name.”

**35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“They need to have all these things in place to have a healthy life and something, have a healthy mind to live.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Man, they’re always happy when they see us coming up in the bus and the vans or whatever. They’re always happy, they come running out, ‘Hey, Children’s Ground’... they get really happy and that’s the best part, man, seeing the kids smile.”

**35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence indicates that Children's Ground's Family Health & Wellbeing created critical building blocks for long term health and wellbeing and improving health inequity and disadvantage.

Access to health promotion and prevention increased, as did children's health knowledge, agency and healthy behaviours. This contributed to normalising healthy behaviours and reported improvements in children's health and wellbeing in their earliest years.

Improved nutritional intake and knowledge impacted children and some family homes. The longer-term impact of this can be prevention of chronic illness such as diabetes. This is something that will not be visible for some years. However, critical preventative behaviours are being demonstrated and evidenced.

Integration of health into learning enabled established health and health practices as a regular and normalised focus for children. Both cultural and western health and wellbeing are now part of their regular health literacy and routine behaviours in early years learning. This is laying the foundations for healthy life choices and health agency.

Evidence indicates a clear connection between health promotion engagement and Children's Ground's increased resourcing of community-based health prevention and promotion. A focus on trauma-informed early childhood practice, safety, social and emotional wellbeing and cultural safety and identity is evident and provides the emotional foundation for improved physical health and social/emotional wellbeing into the future.

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

The evaluation indicates that Children's Ground established a range of routine preventative health and wellbeing measures. This increased access, engagement and improved health behaviours and health literacy.

While the long-term impact on preventable chronic disease, hospitalisations and death will only be evident in the future, critical drivers for prevention were established.



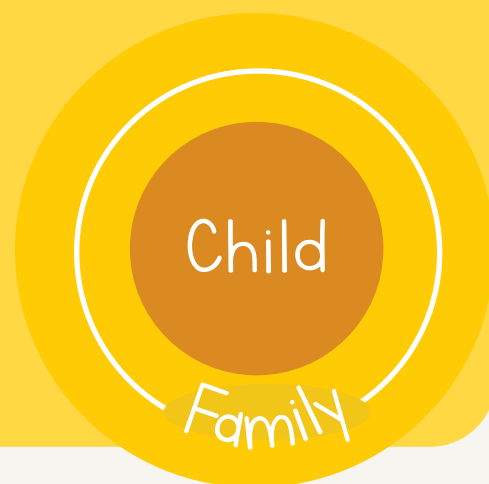
CHANGE AND IMPACT FOR FAMILIES

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

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

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

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



"I love my work. So I can support families. Children's Ground's been like a home to me and family that I work with, they're like a family to me and Children's Ground is really strong, working with both sides."

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023



Children's Ground always works with children alongside their families and communities to ensure families are supported to provide the conditions children need to flourish.¹⁰⁸

Families walking alongside their children is the key headline indicator identified by First Nations people. It was identified that babies and children need to be connected with Elders to fulfill the intergenerational kinship roles and responsibilities within families across people of all ages.

This is supported by western research that also recognises that families have the greatest influence over a child's development and life wellbeing.^{109 110 111 112 113}

Where Children's Ground operates, poverty and/or economic stress are experienced by most families. Children living in families and environments where there is economic stress, neglect and violence fare worse across a range of life indicators, including educational attainment, safety and access to basic services,¹¹⁴ as well as lifelong physical and mental health challenges.^{115 116 117 118}



108 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>.

109 *ibid*

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

111 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.

112 Likhar, A; Baghel, P; Patil. 2022. Early Childhood Development and Social Determinants. *Cureus* 14(9): e29500. DOI 10.7759/cureus.29500.

113 George, P; Monks, H; Cross, D. 2020. The critical role of parenting in early childhood development [CoLab Evidence Report]. Retrieved from <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/resources>.

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

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

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

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

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

FAMILIES ARE INVOLVED IN THEIR CHILD'S LEARNING, WELLBEING AND DEVELOPMENT

KEY FINDINGS:

- 63% increase in the number of family members 18+ years walking alongside their children, with 519 family members engaged in learning and health promotion alongside their children – an increase from 319 in 2017 to 2019.
- 87% of families reported that families are 'walking alongside their children' more or a lot more.
- 92% of families felt there were more activities and opportunities for children and families to spend time together.

"I'm just feeling proud that I'm doing stuff for my children and my families. Just really proud."

45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

This section presents evaluation data about the extent and ways in which families walked alongside their children through their engagement and leadership of Children's Ground in their communities and across the Central Australian region.

PROGRESS MEASURES:

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

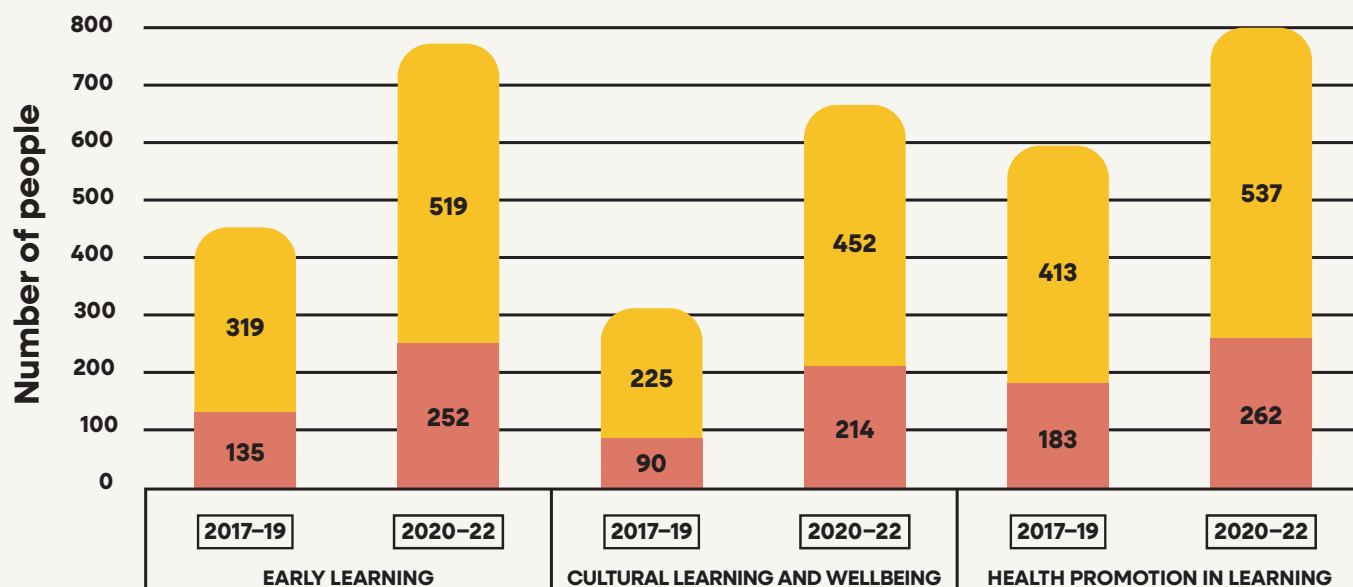
All children (100%) aged 0-8 years (n=468) had family engaged directly in their learning, health and wellbeing, as per Children's Ground's policy developed by First Nations governance.

"The little ones with the adults, the adults got to be there with them all the time."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Graph 14 shows the number of family members engaged in children's learning, health and wellbeing and the ways in which families walked alongside their children. Data is presented by two age groups: children and young people 9-17 years and adult family members 18+ years. This shows the extent to which Children's Ground engaged families across generations and compares engagement between evaluation periods.

GRAPH 14: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT BY AGE GROUP AND TYPE



Types of family engagement

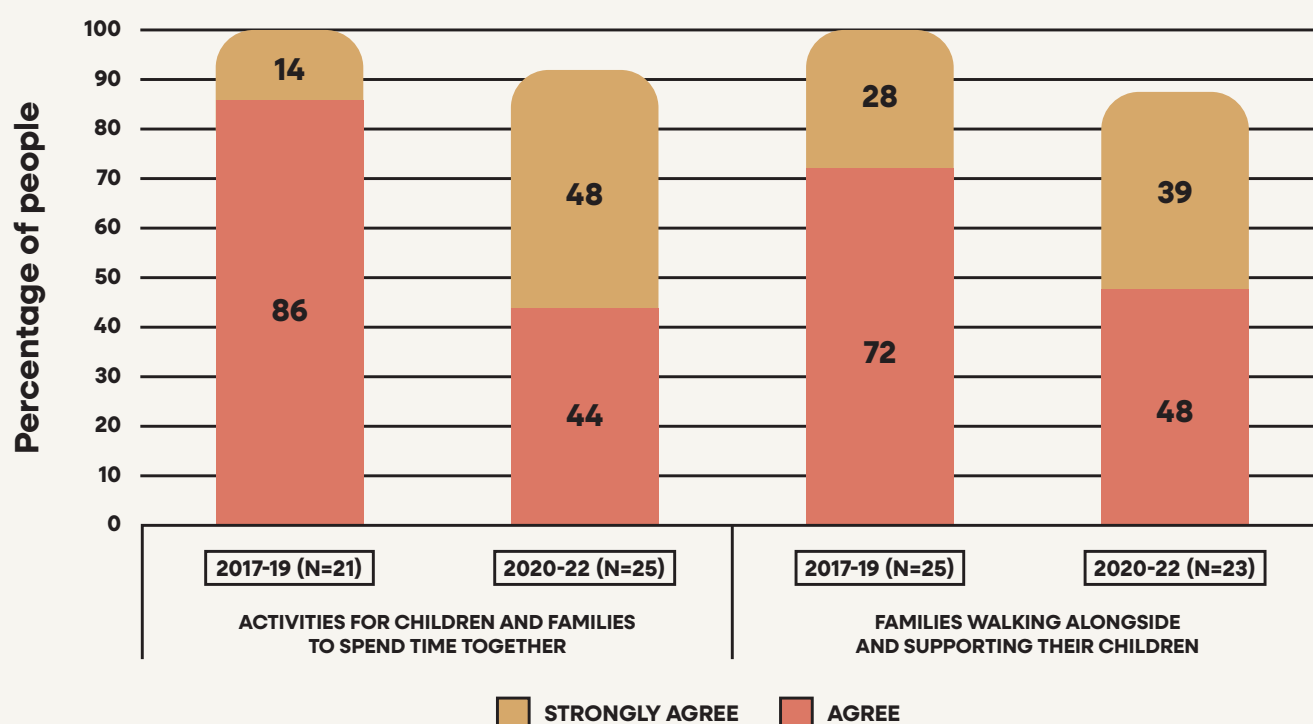
9-17 YEARS 18+ YEARS

This data demonstrates that, between the two evaluation periods, there was an increase in the number of family members engaging in learning, health promotion and cultural learning alongside their children.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/families were asked 'Are there more or less activities for children and families to spend time

together since Children's Ground started - or about the same?' and 'How are families going walking along side and supporting their children - now compared to before Children's Ground started?' Graph 15 shows the extent to which people reported family engagement.

GRAPH 15: FAMILY/STAFF REPORTED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WITH THEIR CHILDREN



Between the two evaluation periods, staff/family reports about families walking alongside their children showed a slight decrease in the overall per cent of people reporting this as on track. There was an increase in people strongly agreeing rather than agreeing. The decrease may be due to the increased numbers of children attending and the expectation that certain family members attend but were not yet engaging at levels expected by First Nations staff.

In the anonymous staff survey, 75% of staff (n=33) agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (39%) that most families engaged in setting goals for their children's cultural and western learning, health and wellbeing. Nine per cent of staff disagreed.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members were asked 'How are families going walking alongside their children?'. Some people talked from their personal perspectives as parents and others talked about their observations of families they know. The strongest theme to emerge was people describing how more families engaged with their children in activities, in learning and through employment at Children's Ground.

"There's a lot of change I can see like in communities of people I know that are spending more time with their children and grandchildren."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"There's been a big change in my life since starting at Children's Ground – being around my kids."

**25-35 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I've been helping with the washing hands and blowing noses. And packing up toys after kids play. And bit of dishwashing. It was really good fun coming out to join the other mums with their bubs, coming out to Children's Ground. It made me feel that I was welcome. And my kids were having a good time, they had friends, making new friends at Children's Ground. And they made me feel warm and made me feel comfortable coming every time to Children's Ground. So, we worked it as a family team in Children's Ground."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I think there's more parents and carers, they're there for the little ones, yeah. Not like three years ago. The little ones used to fight each other. But now they're doing better. They're there all the time, the families."

**50-60 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Being part of Children's Ground, I think they like it or they love it... because I've seen changes, when families was just staying home with their little ones and I got them involved with Children's Ground. I think for my side it's gone really strong, like they really want to get involved with Children's Ground. They want to be part of everything."

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

First Nations staff and families also outlined some ongoing challenges with family engagement, and areas for ongoing improvement through Children's Ground. At the centre of these was the need for ongoing efforts to engage more parents.

“Some of the challenges we got is mothering women to become mothers to look after their kids and where to be with their kids. To look after them and look after their children to make sure there's no grog.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“There's always going to be challenges, like there's people in families, they don't give a shit or really have an opinion... There might be someone that works here that brings her grandchildren... but like the parents of these grandchildren, they don't see the importance of what we're trying to do.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Everything's good, everyone's learning, and I hope they're [some family members] looking properly at it too themselves. They've got to make an effort and do it themselves, because they're grown women who are now Elders, that's why Aboriginal women need to start learning themselves. It's no good just waiting around to be told by us... That's how we gotta teach these young girls, so they can realise and do it for themselves.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence shows that Children's Ground continued to create First Nations led conditions that enabled all children to have family members actively involved in their learning, wellbeing and development. This was achieved in the first evaluation and continued through the second evaluation period. Evidence suggests that ongoing efforts are required to continue increasing parent and family involvement.

Children's Ground's engagement of families is intergenerational, suggesting a strengthening across generations within families.

Family reports demonstrate strengthening of family connections – which is critical to children's sense of belonging, emotional safety, cultural and physical safety.

Continued progress with family engagement is considered one of the foundational building blocks to sustained improvements in child outcomes over time.



FAMILIES ARE ECONOMICALLY STRONG

KEY FINDINGS:

- 83 First Nations people were employed, an increase from 59 in 2017 to 2019.
- 31% of staff had never worked in paid employment before Children's Ground.
- Of those who had worked before, 71% weren't employed when they started working with Children's Ground; of this, 83% had not worked in the past 12 months or more.
- 107 First Nations people engaged in employment support and/or financial literacy and money management support.
- 121 First Nations people engaged in training and professional development.
- 205 people engaged in enterprise, experiencing phases of resource development, production, marketing and sales.

"The thing about Children's Ground that really struck me is when I visit there, I see a lot of Aboriginal people there. Not just the clients, families, children, but people that work there. I'm really struck that a really high percentage of the employees are local Aboriginal people working with their people and it's a flexible employment model. I think that's absolutely critical. Other Aboriginal organisations I go to, when I go to meet people, I very rarely meet with an Aboriginal person."

SENIOR NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT OFFICER, 2024



Western evidence shows that economic wellbeing of families has a positive impact on early childhood development.^{119 120}

Children's Ground recognises that, in communities where unemployment has been endemic, economic wellbeing needs to start with empowerment, role modelling, building a workforce and financial skills and knowledge. For First Nations people, creating culturally-based employment opportunities that recognise the skills and talents within the community is seeking to create a new normal within families, communities and the local workforce.

Economic development is considered in both short- and long-term outcomes. In the long term, a key measure will be the number of families experiencing economic independence (free from welfare and living above the poverty line).

In the short- to medium-term, a key measure is increased opportunities for and engagement in employment, with young people and adults role modelling engagement in employment and economic opportunities through micro enterprise.

This section presents data and evidence related to Children's Ground's Economic Development & Wellbeing platform, including employment, training and professional development, employment support, financial literacy and support and enterprise development.

As with many of the Children's Ground's progress measures, creating access and increasing engagement were key early-stage measures.



119 Perry-Jenkins, M; Laws, HB; Sayer, A; Newkirk, K. 2020 Parents' work and children's development: A longitudinal investigation of working-class families. *J Fam Psychol.* 34(3):257-268. doi: 10.1037/fam0000580. Epub 2019 Aug 15. PMID: 31414863; PMCID: PMC7021583.

120 Likhar, A; Baghel, P; Patil. 2022. Early Childhood Development and Social Determinants. *Cureus* 14(9): e29500. DOI 10.7759/cureus.29500.

Employment engagement and experience

PROGRESS MEASURES:

- Young people and adults have increased access to economic opportunities and support.
- Number of family members (young people and adults) engaged in employment.

From 2020 to 2022, a total of 83 local First Nations people were employed with Children's Ground. This is an increase from 59 in the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019). Throughout this evaluation period, this represented 71% of the Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe workforce.

Across all years, from 2017 to 2022, 93 local First Nations people have been employed with Children's Ground. This includes 78 community-based staff (people from the four communities leading Children's Ground) and 15 from the Arrernte Central Australian Nations.

Of the local community-based First Nations staff (n=78), from 2017 to 2022:

- 31% were working in paid employment for the first time.
- 71% (of those who had been employed in the past) weren't employed when they started working with Children's Ground – of these, 83% had not worked in the past 12 months before starting work with Children's Ground.

This evaluation period saw a 78% retention rate of community-based First Nations staff.

Throughout this evaluation period, the capacity for widespread employment increased as funding and delivery increased. This resulted in more culturally-based roles and saw First Nations people in western-trained roles.

First Nations people continued to work in a range of roles based on their interests and strengths and on organisational delivery needs and priority areas – and to increase their work and roles over time.

“When I first started, I just started off doing maintenance, fuelling cars and making sure of vehicles – and support Early Years, getting things prepared so they can go out on session. And then yeah, I just started developing my skills, talking up, going on to conferences, just building up my role here. And yeah, so I worked with the men's support... and youths, and now I'm in community development. So yeah, I started off small and it gets big.”

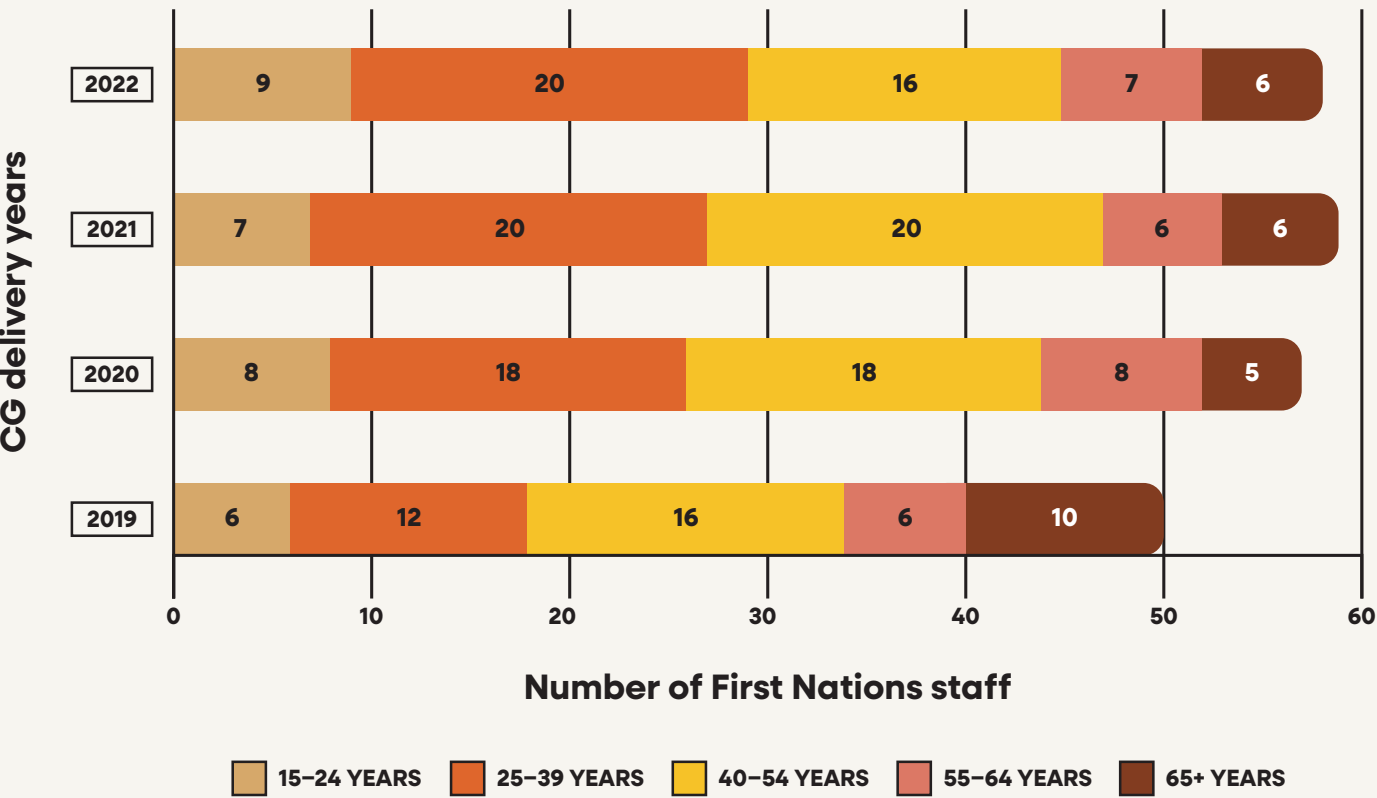
**20-30 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Well, first, when I first came to Children's Ground, I went there with mum because mum works here, and I just used to go out and just go in a session and participate with them. And then two years later in 2018... I started working here at Children's Ground. And then yeah, doing part time, casual. And then in 2019, I started to come in and just been on contract. And yeah, just I love working here.”

**20-30 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Graph 16 shows the number of First Nations staff who worked by age group in each year, building on 2019 from the previous evaluation period.

GRAPH 16: NUMBER OF FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE EMPLOYED WITH CHILDREN’S GROUND, BY AGE GROUP AND YEAR



Note: Data includes First Nations staff from the four communities leading Children’s Ground and from the Arrernte Nation (or other Central Australian Nations).

This data shows an increase in the number of First Nations staff employed with Children’s Ground between evaluation periods. The largest increase was in the age range of 25-39 years.

There has been sustained employment of people aged 40-54 and 55-64 years. This group of people will become the next generation of community leaders, cultural authorities and Elders. The data shows a slight increase in engagement of young people in employment.

Employment figures across all age groups under 65+ years have the potential to increase subject to funding resources.

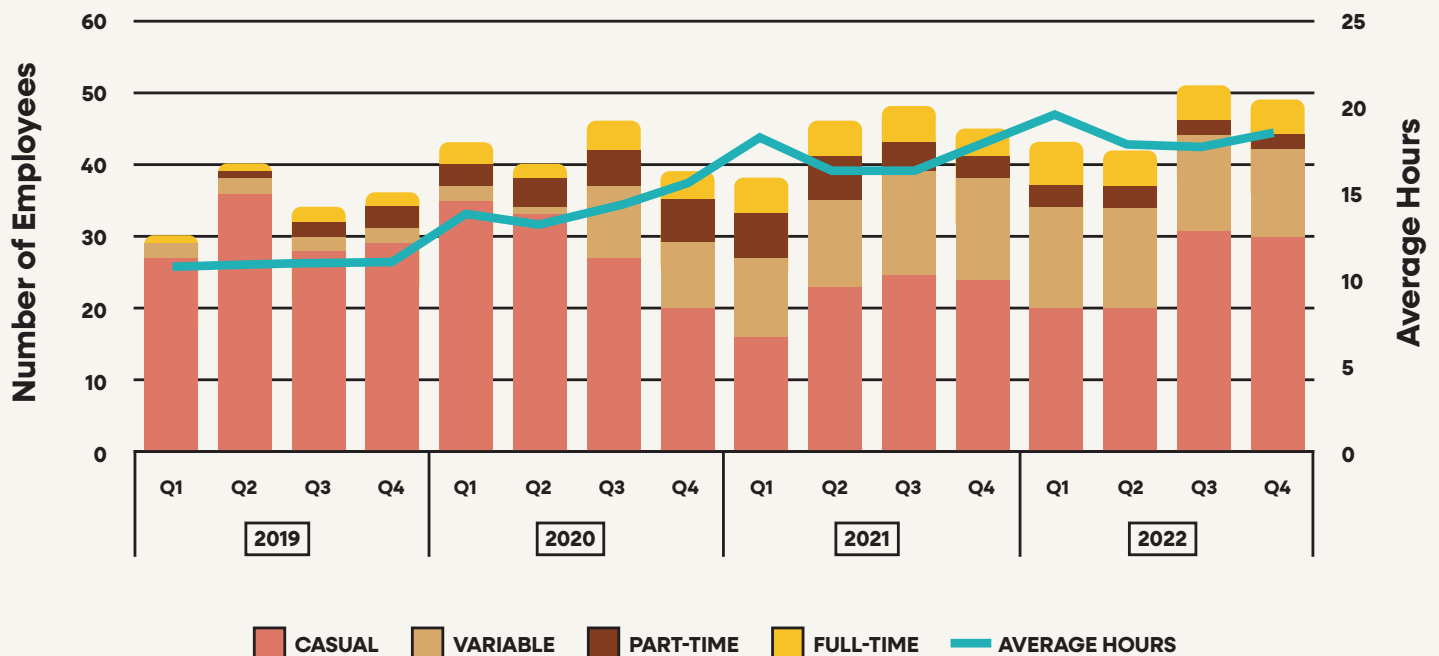
While community leaders identified the employment of young men as an area that needs strengthening, one local service noted:

“I was really struck with how Children’s Ground bring in a lot of young men into the space of working, which is so rare in other places.”

LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDER, 2024

Graph 17 shows the number of First Nations people employed with Children's Ground throughout this evaluation period by quarters and years, building on 2019 as the final year of the first evaluation period. It also shows the average hours worked by quarters and years.

GRAPH 17: NUMBER OF FIRST NATIONS EMPLOYEES, BY QUARTER, YEAR, CONTRACT TYPE AND AVERAGE HOURS WORKED



This data shows that the number of First Nations staff employed at Children's Ground increased from the first evaluation period (2019). It also shows an increase in the number of staff moving from casual to fixed-term contracts and an increase in the average hours worked between the two evaluation periods. However, this data also shows that staff numbers, contract types and hours fluctuated throughout this evaluation period.

The increase in casual contracts in 2021 and the second half of 2022 corresponds to an increase in the number of people employed. This is an expected increase with many community-based First Nations staff starting their employment on a casual contract (with flexible work hours), to build their experience over time and at their pace, moving to a fixed-term contract with set contracted work hours. People can move between contract conditions depending on their circumstances. While most people move from casual to fixed employment, some opt to return to casual when external personal matters are pressing.

Decreases in the number of staff employed occurred during COVID-19 due to workplace vaccination mandates. The fear and misinformation that circulated about COVID-19 vaccinations meant some people did not get vaccinations and could not continue their employment with Children's Ground.

The increases and decreases in average hours worked are also expected as we continue to increase local First Nations employment and with new and current staff continuing to experience many life circumstances and stressors that impact engagement in employment. Loss and grief continue to significantly impact many First Nations staff and their families. There are also periods of time where cultural ceremonies and protocols can necessitate time away from work to fulfil responsibilities.

Collectively, this data demonstrates that Children's Ground's flexible 'no barriers' approach to employment continued to enable local First Nations staff to engage with and maintain employment – increasing their experience and hours over time.

Key themes about employment at Children's Ground that emerged from evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members included:

1. Role modelling employment.
2. Feeling valued and respected – culturally based positions valued.

From here, this section is broken up into these two strongest themes.

It is worth noting that First Nations staff and family members also reported the importance and impact of working alongside family and Children's Ground 'feeling like a family'. Families being together, working together and supporting each other are strong themes reported on in several places throughout this report. Therefore, it will not be reported on again here.

Theme 1: Role modelling employment

A strong theme to emerge from the evaluation interviews was the importance of First Nations family members working as a form of role modelling. Many staff and families talked about the impact of children seeing their family go to work each day and the pathway or road they are creating for their children to follow. Many also talked about how happy and proud it makes children to see their family going to work.

The theme of role modelling also emerged in the first evaluation report. In this period, people expanded on the impact for children of family role modelling employment.

"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**

"It's sort of like a role modelling... 'If she can do that, then I can do that too'."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"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**

"It makes them [children] feel happy and, you know, talk about it to other kids, 'My mum works there'. You know, because other parents are just doing nothing at home and their kids follow what they do. If they see someone working, that will make them confident and realise, you know, you've got to get up and do that."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Theme 2: Feeling valued and respected – culturally based positions valued

The importance of culturally-based positions that value, respect and utilise cultural roles, responsibilities and strengths was a clear theme to emerge from evaluation interviews. People talked about the importance of culturally-based roles for cultural safety and to enable cultural learning in first language, on country and from the right cultural educators. People also talked about this enabling people to engage in employment without a western qualification and feeling valued – and as a result, feeling comfortable and confident. These quotes are representative of the collective views of staff and family members.

“It’s different because you don’t need all of that thing [western qualifications], you’ve got your cultural knowledge to teach, you know, you’ve already got all those stuff in your head, you’ve seen it and grew up with it all the time. You don’t need a certificate for that.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“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**

“I think the comfortable comes from you know that you’re valued here...”

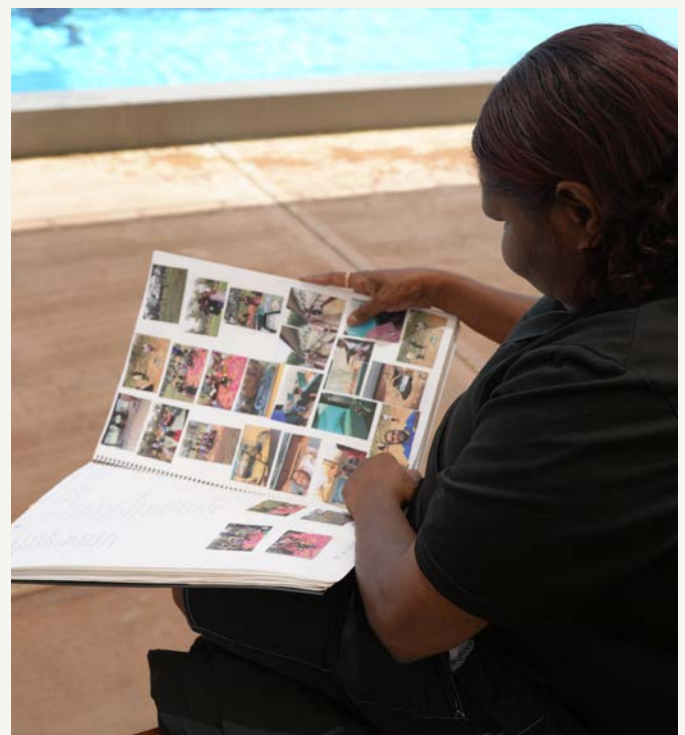
I think when you know that you are in the right place, then you do feel comfortable. And having other people that are all comfortable in their roles.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Jobs that you don’t need a western piece of paper for, it’s based off your life experiences and your cultural knowledge... I think we do that well, like how we celebrate people’s skills and difference that we all bring and our knowledge that we all bring here and how we get built up to that, that’s valued about us.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

No one referred to areas for improvement in employment at Children’s Ground, with the exception of people reporting the need for employment of more First Nations staff to create employment opportunities for more people.



Some First Nations staff/family members talked about their worries about attitudes and aspirations of some young people within families and communities.

“If they [young people] don’t have parents that are working, they’re thinking, ‘Then why should I finish school. I can’t wait until I’m 16 until I can get my own Newstart’. That’s a lot of young kids’ goal or their dream.”

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“Some [young people] are like, ‘Why would we want to finish school, you know, look what they’re doing, they finished school and there’s not enough jobs. They can’t even get jobs, why do we have to finish school?’ And that mentality is big in communities everywhere, where I know a lot of my nieces and nephews, they didn’t finish school. And why should they because there’s no jobs waiting for them.”

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

These worries demonstrate that generational unemployment is the status quo. It is the norm that families have grown up with and that young people have observed and experienced. Children’s Ground is supporting a community-led new reality. There is a demand for employment which is limited by funding and resources. The intention is to grow employment so that the next generation of children and young people see and experience this as a norm.

Employment support

Throughout this evaluation period, 107 First Nations people engaged in employment support, including financial literacy and money management support. This is an increase from 18 staff in 2019. The significant increase is due to growth in dedicated workforce support resources and staff, and increased data collection about employment support.

While funding for a Financial Counsellor position was not received during this evaluation period, a new support program for women’s employment was established and increased resources for operations and administration enabled increased provision of employment support and data capture.

In evaluation interviews, when asked about employment support provided by Children’s Ground, two clear themes emerged:

1. Employment support reduces barriers to engagement in employment.
2. Employment support provides opportunities for practical financial literacy and management.

People referred to daily transport to and from work as enabling engagement in employment, as well as support provided for people to gather ID, birth certificates, tax file numbers, working with children checks – all requirements for employment.

People also referred to weekly pays and micro-financing opportunities such as receiving wage portions as food vouchers or access to savings mechanisms, and support to discuss and navigate the choices weekly. This demonstrates that supported employment also provided an opportunity for financial literacy and management support in real life circumstances.

“Helping with all the Ochre cards and the police checks and all that. And I think the pickups really help. Yeah, if you don’t have a vehicle or don’t have a licence. We do offer that pickup and I think if it wasn’t for that, we wouldn’t have half the staff coming in.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Helping to get Ochre card for whoever hasn’t had or licence. You know, people who didn’t know how to go and get things by themselves. They’ve got support to get all that stuff. Children’s Ground is supporting, do all that to help.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“It’s helped a lot from savings, having a food voucher, it’s really good to teach people how to save money too, you know, and knowing that they won’t [lag] behind on food on the weekend they’ve always got that gift card.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



Training and professional development

From 2020 to 2022, Children's Ground continued to provide opportunities for staff to engage in culturally and western-based training and professional development.

Throughout the period, 121 First Nations people engaged in training and professional development (including 24 young people aged 18-24 years and 97 adults 25+ years). Staff also engaged in informal training and mentoring with non-First Nations staff that has not been formally recorded to date.

The following types of job-related, western-based training were provided:

- Organisational compliance training.
- Internal CG Approach sessions.
- Management, leadership, governance, recruitment and retention training.
- Mandatory reporting.
- First Aid and CPR training (including first aid specific to early childhood education and care settings).
- Trauma-informed practice, including understanding neurobiology of complex trauma.
- Social/Emotional wellbeing and mindfulness (breathing cycles, emotional freedom techniques, self-healing art/play, deep play).
- De-escalation training.
- Family and domestic violence.
- Suicide prevention.
- Food Safety Supervision.
- Driving training and support to obtain driving licenses, including Light Rigid.
- White Cards (accredited construction).
- Media training.
- Pitching your products, services and yourself (enterprise training).
- Creative trainings (ceramics, digital artwork/ Illustration, graphic design, printmaking).
- Video and interview recording.
- Arts Law & Copyright Information.
- Resource development money story.



The following types of culturally-based learning and training were provided:

- Arrernte language lessons – internal language development and external Arrernte language classes/courses.
- First language resource development workshops.
- Cultural curriculum, standards and assessment workshops.
- Elders, adults and young people engaging in cultural transmission.
- Truth telling workshops – learning about the history of First Nations people and Australia.
- Cultural evaluation framework development.
- Family Wellbeing course.

In 2021, 12 First Nations staff completed and graduated (in 2022) the Certificate II in Family Wellbeing course provided by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. Edmond Doolan, a young First Nations staff member of Children's Ground stated.

"I was so happy that I was able to graduate from the Family Wellbeing course along with many other First Nations staff at Children's Ground. It was hard along the way but doing the course here at Children's Ground helped a lot. We could support each other to complete the training. We learned about how to communicate with someone who is upset and to solve problems with families in a safe way. We also learned ways of looking after ourselves. These skills will help me do my work here at Children's Ground and live up to the principle of Expect and deliver the best."

EDMOND DOOLAN, 2022
YOUNG LEADER WITHIN CHILDREN'S
GROUND'S MEN'S & YOUTH TEAM

Note that First Nations engagement in conference presentations is included further in section 'Outcomes for Community'.

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, people reported benefits of engaging in training as increased learning, learning new skills and learning life skills. People also reported desires to engage in more training.

"Well, I've got some certificates that I didn't know I could get, you know, I've learned a lot about doing things. Seeing how things are done, like, in the western way, yeah."

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"Like somebody to come up there [Alice Springs] and they can do a little bit of training or whatever. And like learn about budgeting, 'How would you spend this money?', if they give you a grant to start a project or something."

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"I got more courses done, certificates. [XXX]'s got a couple of cards, working-with-children cards. I got an update on my licence to LR [light rigid]. First-aid certificates, computer courses. Yeah, a lot of training. Would like to do more."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"It [Children's Ground] supports them to get better in their education, their life, through training."

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Enterprise development, support and engagement

The Economic Development & Wellbeing platform includes supporting people to develop local enterprises. This scope includes supporting individuals and family groups with establishing and developing their own enterprises (such as art, jewellery, etc). It also includes people engaging with Children's Ground enterprises.

Being involved in enterprise is new for many people and it takes time to build confidence to embark on an individual or family enterprise. Engagement in Children's Ground's learning resource micro enterprise provided an opportunity for people to learn about and engage in enterprise without personal risk.

Throughout this evaluation period, 205 First Nations people from all four Children's Ground communities were engaged in the resource development enterprise.

Resource development also occurred with Atitjere and Bonya, along the Plenty Highway north of Alice Springs, where Children's Ground is a Stronger Communities for Children Facilitating Partner, with the support of the Enterprise team from Alice Springs.

Resource content focuses on early years learning and wellbeing, first language and culture. The resources are for sale as part of Children's Ground's enterprise as well as being used in programs for educational purposes with children, young people and adults. In this evaluation period, some learning resources were sold nationally and internationally.

Within Children's Ground's first language resources enterprise, people have been involved as creators, authors, contributors, musicians, artists and designers, and have engaged in different enterprise stages, from concept and content development through to sales and marketing. This has provided a source of income through royalties as well as skills and knowledge in relation to business.

SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has had a dramatic impact on local First Nations engagement in employment. This was particularly noticeable for people who experienced generational exclusion and barriers and never or rarely worked in paid employment. These outcomes built on employment engagement from the first evaluation period.

Data shows that people are continuing to increase their hours worked and are moving to more fixed-term contracts as their experience grows. It also shows that flexible contract arrangements are important in supporting the staff who are experiencing external pressures that impact work and that this is contributing to employment retention.

This evaluation period saw increased employment support and engagement in training and professional development.

Employment support was also evidenced as increasing real-time financial literacy and management opportunities and experience. Similarly, some people are learning about enterprise development through practical on-the-job experience, increasing knowledge and skills that could contribute to other economic opportunities in the future.

The impact of local First Nations employment continues to be a driver of child and family engagement and is visibly enabling cultural safety in delivery across the CG Approach. Local First Nations employment is a key foundation of and driver for long-term change.

FAMILIES ARE HEALTHY AND SOCIALLY STRONG

KEY FINDINGS:

- 88% increase in family members engaged in health promotion and support, from 487 young people (9-17 years) and adult (18+ years) family members in 2017 to 2019 to 914 in 2020 to 2022.
- 88% of family members reported that, since Children's Ground started, it is easier to access services when they have worries about children's physical health and 92% reported easier service access for adult physical health.
- 173% increase in family members engaged with social/emotional wellbeing promotion and support with Children's Ground – an increase from 240 young people and adults in 2017 to 2019 to 655 in 2020 to 2022.

“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

The wellbeing of the family directly impacts the wellbeing and development of children.¹²¹ 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.

All delivery across the CG Approach seeks to support social and cultural wellbeing and safety by creating opportunities for positive social engagements. The aim is to strengthen family and social connectedness by building on the strength of kinship.

Family health and wellbeing

PROGRESS MEASURES:

- Families have increased access to health promotion and social/emotional wellbeing promotion and support.
- Number of family members (young people and adults) engaged in health and social/emotional wellbeing.

The role of Children's Ground's Family Health team is to work with families to mitigate, manage and prevent illness and to improve health outcomes for those living with illness. By delivering in community, the team works with individuals and families to address multiple and complex health burdens, seeking to make health and wellbeing a visible part of everyday life, and to reduce the impact of family health on children's learning, development and wellbeing.

¹²¹ 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>.

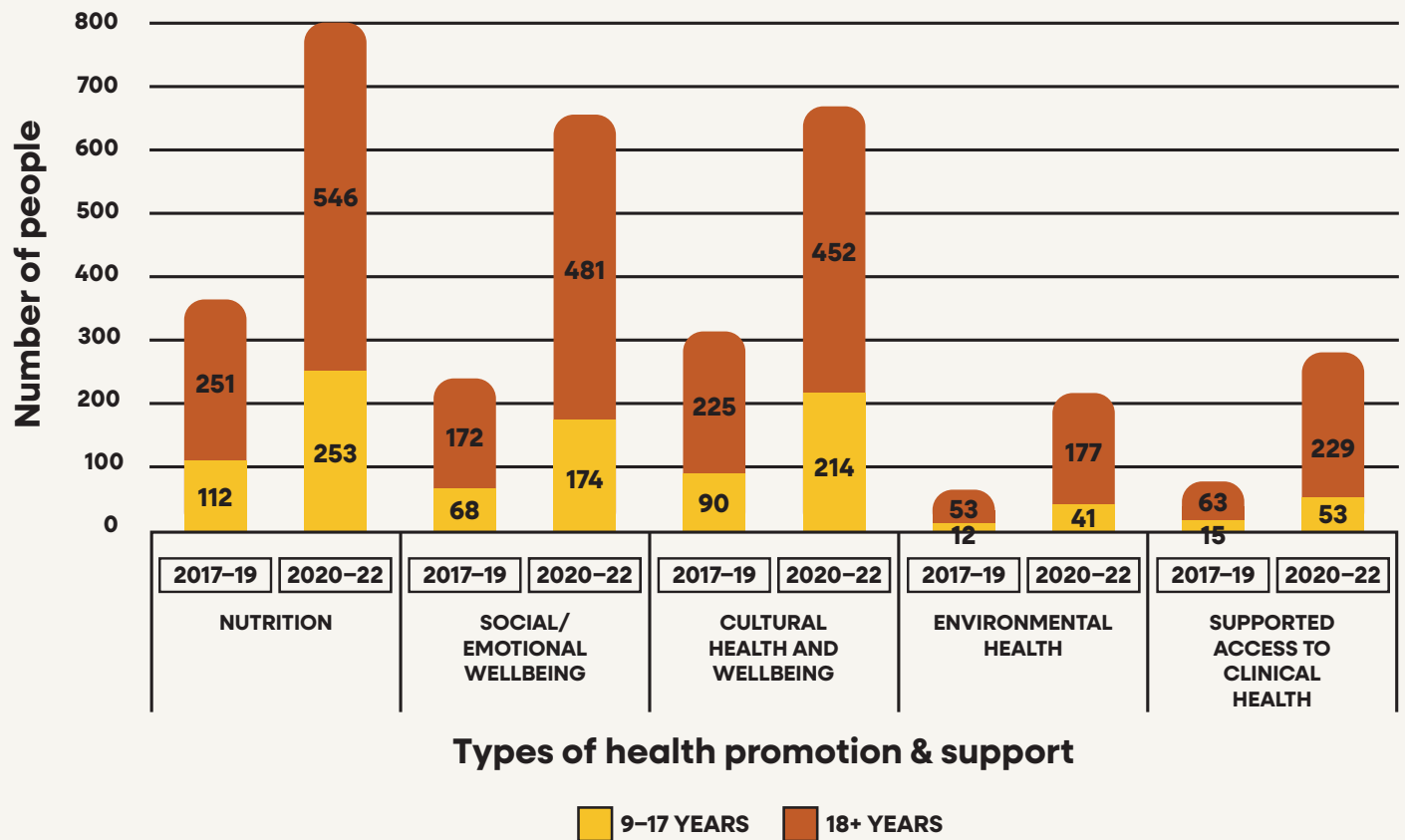
Family engagement in health and wellbeing

Throughout this evaluation period, the most prevalent 'reasons for engagement' in health promotion and support at Children's Ground include physical health, mental health, cultural health and environmental health:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 family and community planning, information and vaccination support. • Clinical health support for both chronic health (e.g. kidney, heart etc.) and acute health (e.g. sores, illness etc.) • Medication support. • Eye health issues. • Maternal Health during pregnancy. • Dental health issues. • Ear/Hearing issues. • Respiratory issues. • General overall health. • Skin issues. • Child immunisation/vaccination. • Baby health after birth. • Child behaviour. • Alcohol issues. • Disability support and advocacy. • COVID-19 health planning. • COVID-19 vaccination. • Family worries. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression. • Social/Emotional wellbeing anxiety/worry/spirit. • Suicidal behaviour. • Family death/grief/loss. • Funeral support. • Nutrition. • Food security. • Water access/security. • Housing issues – hygiene, overcrowding, safety. • Rubbish removal/disposal (e.g. skip bin, etc). • Power/Electricity security. • Elder support. • Community environments (safety). • Family violence – survivor. • Family violence – witness. • Community conflict/violence. • Sexual violence/abuse. • Homelessness. |
|--|--|

From 2020 to 2022, 914 family members engaged in universal and targeted health promotion and support. This included 271 young people (9-17 years) and 643 adult family members (18+ years). This is an increase from 487 in 2017 to 2019.

Graph 18 shows the number of family members (young people and adults aged 9+ years) engaged in various types of family health and wellbeing promotion and support, comparing engagement between evaluation period of 2017 to 2019 and 2020 to 2022.

GRAPH 18: NUMBER OF FAMILY MEMBERS ENGAGED IN HEALTH PROMOTION AND SUPPORT, BY AGE GROUP AND TYPE

This data shows that family engagement in health promotion and support increased for young people and adults. Consistent with increased engagement demonstrated for children 0-8 years. The number of young people and adults engaged in some key areas of health and wellbeing doubled.

Over the period, 466 people were supported with COVID-19 related health promotion planning and support. This does not include the health and hygiene promotion work integrated into early learning sessions during the period. Most of this support was undertaken with adults for their family, household and community; all people benefiting from this support could not be captured.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/ family members regularly talked about increased access to social/emotional wellbeing support and the benefits of such access.

“A lot of people are starting to use the social, emotional counselling.”

30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/ FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“Social and emotional mob, they’re really good to help our people, they talk to them if they need things.”

50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/ FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“Children’s Ground’s been there, helping families in their emotions. You’ve got someone in Children’s Ground that you can go to, and they can take you through that and help you with it and it helps really good. Because for wellbeing and all this. Counsellors always talking for whatever problems there are.”

40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/ FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

“I always speak to [XXX] over the phone and she comes and, you know, sits with me when I have worries. She comes sometimes to home, you know, when I feel upset, you know, I worry about my family or about my partner when we have an argument. I tell [XXX] to come and, you know, calm me down and sit in there and we talk stories.”

**20-30 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

The explicit staff/family member references to engagement in social/emotional wellbeing support is a change from the previous evaluation period where this type of support was not specifically highlighted by families interviewed.

Increased access through flexible and responsive support

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, people reported that, since Children’s Ground started, it has been easier to access services when they have worries about child or adult health:

- 88% (n=24) of staff/family members reported it is easier to access services when they have worries about children’s physical health and 92% (n=25) reported easier service access for adult physical health.
- 75% (n=24) reported it is easier to access services when they have worries about children’s emotional health, and 74% (n=23) reported easier service access for adult emotional health.

Furthermore, internal data shows that Children’s Ground staff supported 304 people of all ages with service coordination and access. This included: service coordination, with Children’s Ground staff coordinating services to work together with a child, individual and family; support to access a health appointment at

Children’s Ground or at a local clinic, and; support to access another service through formal referral.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members talked about a range of ways they were supported by Children’s Ground. The strongest theme to emerge was ‘Flexible and responsive support’.

Children’s Ground’s deliberate strategy of working holistically with families where and when they need support was recognised by staff/family members, with many people specifically noting being supported to engage with local clinical health services.

“They help us when we come to work, and when they tell me you got appointment at hospital, they take me there, drop me off and they come back and I call them, ‘Come and pick me up.’ They pick me up and bring me back here [at work].”

**20-30 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“When Children Ground come in [to health service appointments], like people are feeling more comfortable. People are talking to doctors and nurses and dentists. So, people feel comfortable... And with Children’s Ground people are starting to learn, that we can trust these services.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Just encourage them to go check-ups... ‘Come on, we’re going to the clinic to get your eyes checked and your ears.’ Show them importance of it.”

**35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“We give them permission to talk to our nurse and the doctor. Because we haven’t got phone... So, we contact Children’s Ground and they will contact the nurse for us.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Before [Children’s Ground] we used to wait for people to come and see us. The staff we are working with, we just call them and they just come around straight away if we need anything. That is a really good organisation, you know.”

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Collectively, staff and family reports demonstrate increased access to and engagement in family health and wellbeing for families (young people and adults).



Social engagement and connections

PROGRESS MEASURES:

- Families have increased access to social activities and environments.
- Number of family members (young people and adults) engaged in social activities and environments.

Social connectedness is a protective measure for social and emotional wellbeing and mental health.^{122 123} For First Nations people, social and emotional wellbeing includes a focus on individuals and whole community. It is also holistic, including cultural, kinship, social, physical and spiritual wellbeing from early childhood to adulthood.^{124 125}

In the context of social connectedness too often being centred around sorry business, one of Children’s Ground’s key strategies is to create new and positive community events for increasing social connectedness through regular celebrations and events.

Throughout the evaluation period, Children’s Ground held 53 events, celebrations, cultural activities, camps, etc, with 503 people of all ages engaged as large family and community groups.

- 122 Saeri, AK; Cruwys, T; Barlow, FK; Stronge, S; Sibley, CG. 2018. Social connectedness improves public mental health: Investigating bidirectional relationships in the New Zealand attitudes and values survey; Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 52(4) 365– 374.
- 123 Ziggs Ivan Santini, ZI; Jose, PE; Cornwell, EY; Koyanagi, A., Nielsen, L.; Hinrichsen, C., Meilstrup, C., Madsen, K.R., Koushede, V. 2020. Social disconnectedness, perceived isolation, and symptoms of depression and anxiety among older Americans (NSHAP): a longitudinal mediation analysis; The Lancet; Open Access.
- 124 Gee, G., Dudgeon, P., Schultz, C., Hart, A., Kelly, K. 2014. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing. In Dudgeon, P. Milroy, H. Walker, R. (Ed.), Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice (2nd ed., pp. 55-68). Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- 125 Swan P, Raphael B. 1995. Ways forward, vol. 1 & 2. National consultancy report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health.

Children's Ground's capacity to hold regular events and celebrations was impacted by COVID-19 and a lack of dedicated resources to deliver afterhours and weekend events and celebrations. However, people actively engaged in the events that were held, particularly during the challenging times of COVID-19 social distancing where families coming together was valued by many people.

The events and celebrations created a range of important opportunities including:

- Safe and positive social environments.
- Strengthening social and family connections.
- Strengthening the connection between land, culture and kinship.
- Celebrating children.
- Access to entertainment.

As evidenced throughout this report, social and cultural capital and family strengthening was also created through: Children's Ground's community leadership and empowerment; culturally and place-based delivery; the intergenerational approach; and local community-based employment – all creating 'soft entry' points into services, supports and leadership through family connections.



SUMMARY

Evidence shows that, during the period of the evaluation, Children's Ground saw active family engagement and support in health, social life and overall wellbeing. With access to and engagement in employment, health and social and cultural activities increasing from the first evaluation period, Children's Ground continued to build the critical conditions required to support the social and economic strength of families.

The flexible and responsive nature of Children's Ground's delivery and support in employment and with health and life priorities and needs was valued and noted as important to enabling engagement.

A key finding of this evaluation is the extent to which people are seeking support to engage with local clinical health services and its benefits to children and families.

Growing family engagement and social connectedness is an important enabler and building block for engaging a critical mass of children and their families within each community. The early foundations of First Nations employment, governance, increased service access and social and cultural strengthening has seen increased family-to-family engagement, demonstrating leadership and increased connectedness.

Through access to safe and positive employment, service and engagement environments for families, Children's Ground is contributing whole family social/emotional wellbeing, health and healing over time.

CHANGE AND IMPACT FOR COMMUNITIES

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework identified three key outcome areas at a community level:

- **The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing.**
- **The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity.**
- **Communities are safe and inclusive.**

Long-term change in these outcomes can only be realised when the generation of children growing up with Children's Ground become young adults, have their own families and are the critical mass within the community who enjoy cultural, social and political opportunity and empowerment.



Children's Ground's ultimate outcome is to implement systemic reform that will achieve equity, justice and wellbeing at a whole of community level. The strategy is to evidence a system that can create transformational change and break through complex, entrenched disadvantage across whole populations.

It will take at least a generation to shift the foundation for the next generation. Therefore, community outcomes are expected to take the full 25 years of the full CG Approach to be achieved – where a critical mass of the current and future generations of children have grown up and experienced equity across key determinants for wellbeing.

Children's Ground's theory of change is that these children will grow to become the majority of families and people in their communities who have seen and experienced improved equity and cultural safety, and access to culturally and western based education, health, employment and empowerment – and that they will be in the position to sustain this for future generations.

There are key indicators for change that will be tracked over the 25 years. At this stage, significant change is not expected. The building blocks are progressive improvement in local empowerment and the social, cultural and economic capital in the community over the course of a generation. This is central to long-term impact for Children's Ground.



PROGRESS MEASURES: Key short-term progress measures for long-term change have been identified through the report and include the following:

- **First Nations governance is established, inclusive and active:** Reported in process evaluation section 'Principle: Child, family & community-led' and expanded below.
- **Community engages in cultural teaching and learning:** Reported in impact evaluation section 'Outcome: Children know their history and feel confident in their culture'.
- **Community reports improvement in empowerment:** Reported in this section and evidenced in 'Principle: Child, family & community-led', by data and by quotes from First Nations people throughout the report.
- **Community have increased access to and engagement in economic and employment opportunities:** Reported in section 'Outcome: Family economic strength'.
- **Community enjoys social and cultural events, activities and celebrations:** Reported in section 'Outcome: Family involvement with their children' and 'Family health and social strength'.
- **Prevalence of social stress:** Reported as a baseline at the beginning of this Community Outcomes section.
- **Community has access to cultural and physically safe intergenerational environments report improved cultural and physical safety:** Reported in this section. Also see Principle sections 'In community' and 'Combining the old and new'.



Community trauma and stress – the context for change

Communities continue to be significantly impacted by invasion and colonisation.

Across all four communities leading Children's Ground, persistent injustice and structural racism and disadvantage prevails. Many experience complex and multiple levels of stress and trauma.

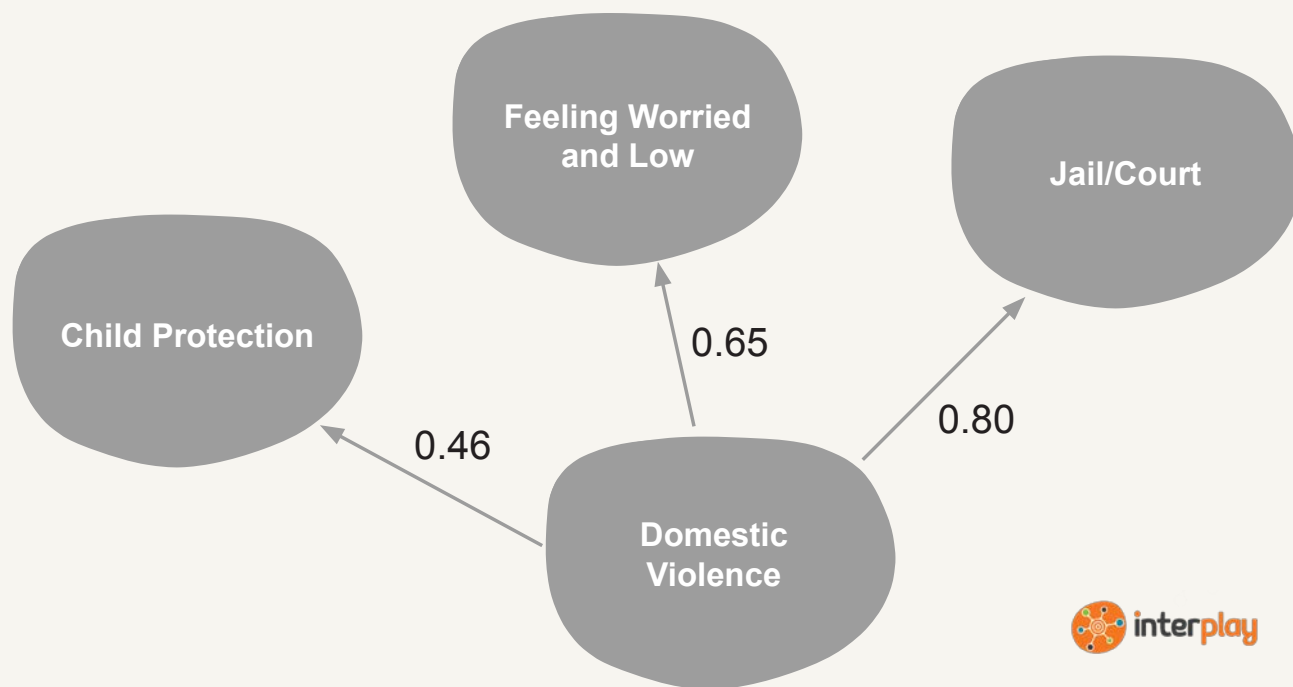
From the first evaluation, a baseline review of trauma and stress with Elders and leaders identified the following:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Massacres. • Children removed. • Land taken away. • People moved off land (into missions). • Religion forced on people. • Forbidden from speaking first language. • Foreign diseases brought in. • Culture taken away - people tried & continue to resist. • Alcohol/drugs/tea/sugar/tobacco. • Basics card – control of your money. • Control over lives – everything. • Trauma. • Still not listened to – no voice. • Resilience. • Chronic ill-health. • Poor literacy & numeracy. • Low income. • Not a lot of opportunity/jobs. • Poor housing/no running water. • Poor nutrition. • Die younger. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues with grog & safety. • Suicide. • Lots of people in prison. • If you speak up, you don't get results. • Kids on the streets. • Racism. • Not recognising traditional law people. • Government got involved in Aboriginal law when they should not have. • People now go straight to police for protection which is worse & increases argument. • Funerals. • Sadness for everyone. • Accidents, suspicious death, missing persons. • Alcohol-related death, domestic violence. • Medical conditions. • Deaths in custody. • Black Lives Matter. |
|--|--|

This trauma and these stressors remain prevalent. The impact of persistent grief, loss and sorry business alone can be seen in Figure 21.

Furthermore, findings from Interplay's Structural Equation Modelling on the baseline data demonstrates a relationship between life stressors, as seen in figure 20.

FIGURE 20: INTERPLAY MAP - LIFE STRESSES ('BAD THINGS') HAPPEN TOGETHER



This Interplay map shows that Life Stresses occur together, not in isolation. This map is particularly focused on domestic violence. It shows that domestic violence, interactions with jail/court and child protection are all positively correlated with each other – they often happen together.¹²⁶

Data analysis also showed there was a negative correlation between Personal Empowerment and Life Stressors. This means that people who experience strong personal empowerment (identity, resilience and self-efficacy) experience less negative life stressors (domestic violence, interactions with jail/court and child protection).¹²⁷

Importantly, this suggests that building Personal Empowerment is protective against these negative life events.¹²⁸ This is evidence of the need for approaches that centre personal empowerment and support people to build identity and resilience in ways that respond to their unique individual and collective family and community circumstances.

The long-term outcomes for community are to see the prevalence of trauma, grief and conflict decrease significantly, and empowerment, safety and wellbeing become prevalent.

“We walk with them [the children] step by step by step by step, so they’ll never have to experience that life.”

35-45 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

¹²⁶ Interplay. 2023. Evaluating Impact Holistically with Interplay Mapping, Children’s Ground Baseline Data Report. Unpublished.

¹²⁷ ibid

¹²⁸ ibid

FIGURE 21: THE IMPACT OF GRIEF AND LOSS

During evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members regularly referred to the frequency and impact of sorry business and funerals on engagement, employment, mental health and wellbeing and on life generally.

"The deaths are like just nonstop. I've thought about... did we lose so many people like this before? You might get four or five a year and now it's like every week someone's dying. Also, like all of the other families that we have to attend funerals for, I think that's just going to be normal for everyone to pass away and going to funerals every week... people that we aren't related to always but they've known us all our life and we've known them all our life."

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

"You can't stop thinking about them. They're in your head. Like my sister there, what happened at hospital, that was really sad for us."

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

"You know when you have a loss in the family, your world is just scattered... When you lose family, you just don't know what to think, you don't think straight - there's a lot of tears and feel sad, don't have good sleep, you worry so much. In a little while you get over it, and then maybe another one, it's like that all the time."

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

"Like I was doing my diploma, but in that time I lost my two brothers and my dad. So, I never got to finish that diploma. So, I was really sad. It took me about, nearly three years to get over that, and right now I'm still impacted - my two sisters passing

away. I'm still in the sorry, but I still go to work. Work is making me sort of forget it."

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

"For the last two years, three years, it's been hard for families coming in because of funerals and stuff. But yeah, we try to keep engaged with them and we do work with everyone."

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

"Well, my sister lost her son and after a while my cousin passed away after that, and then after that my oldest brother, it was just - one after the other, after the other."

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

"You can't stop thinking about them. They're in your head. Like my sister there, what happened at hospital, that was really sad for us."

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

Amongst the persistent grief and loss, people don't lose sight of their aspirations for their children and the next generation cultural leaders.

"We can't stop from that [sorry business]. We've got to keep going, because that's our language and spirit for our kids to be learning, so they can always be learning."

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

Community empowerment and leadership

*“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

Individual, family and community empowerment are central to the CG Approach at all levels. As evidenced throughout this report, local First Nations governance and leadership is one of the most critical drivers for change.

As previously reported, 197 community members were involved in regional and community governance. In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, 67% reported that, since Children’s Ground started, First Nations people making decisions about their lives and about Children’s Ground increased and improved.

People talked about leadership in different ways and from different perspectives. Two strong themes emerged from interview data:

1. Community leadership in systems change.
2. Young people identifying as emerging leaders.

Throughout both themes, people referred to the importance of first language and culture at the centre of leadership and systems change.

Theme 1: Community leadership in systems change

First Nations leadership at Children’s Ground includes local community leadership, regional organisational leadership and public leadership.

Leadership opportunities are embedded through operational delivery, governance meetings, stakeholder meetings, media opportunities, conferences and advocacy with government.

Throughout this evaluation period, First Nations staff continued to be involved in funding and stakeholder meetings. This included meetings with local, jurisdictional and national stakeholders. It also included meetings with all levels of governments. First Nations leaders and staff also continued to lead philanthropic funder visits to the region. Through this leadership, local First Nations people built their knowledge, understanding and empowerment in how government and funding systems work, decision making, advocacy, communication and strategy.

This strategy ensures that Children’s Ground closes the loop on ‘the money story’ so that First Nations communities have visibility and access to decision makers. First Nations leaders built direct relationships with funders and partners and were able to present their solutions and understand and celebrate their achievements in securing funding for their children, families and communities.

First Nations community leaders extended their leadership into public context at the local, national and international scale.

As leaders of the organisation, people used their voices on various national stages as part of Children’s Ground’s strategy to amplify First Nations voices and to influence practice and policy reform to achieve long term systemic change.

Throughout the evaluation period, 19 First Nations staff presented at 10 conferences.

This included the following international, national and local conferences:

- World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education.
- Australian Early Development Census.

- Australian Evaluation Society.
- Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- SNAICC conference.
- ChangeFest.
- Youth mental health forum.
- Warra: Indigenous Languages Youth Forum.
- Ceramics Triennale in Alice Springs.
- Central Australia Knowledge Intersection Symposium.

Presentations were undertaken by First Nations leaders with experience in conference presentations and emerging young leaders presenting for the first time.

“We have conferences. Telling our stories about Children’s Ground.”

**55-65 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“People talk now. They speak up. Like for those young fellas there, they was really shy. Now they can speak up for themselves.”

**65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



“At first when you presented at a conference it’s always so daunting and you’re so nervous. But now I love the chance to get up and share our stories and our work. Before Children’s Ground I could never have seen myself be where I’m at now. I wouldn’t be who I am now if I didn’t have those opportunities.”

I feel like I have grown a lot now and feel more confident.

Now I don’t feel shame or inadequate if I don’t have the information people want or can’t answer a question. I know I can say we will get back to you. I know that people around me know that this is what I’m good at and this is what you’re good at and together we can make it work. Before, that’s what I was afraid of. And all of this is a journey with Children’s Ground.”

**35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

Theme 2: Young people identifying as emerging leaders

From evaluation interviews in this period, there was a noticeable shift in young people talking about themselves and their role as leaders. In the first evaluation period, adults identified the need for young people to learn how to be leaders, including the importance of this for the continuation of first language and culture. In this second evaluation period, young people self-identified as leaders and/or expressed their desire to grow into their leadership roles in their community, family and culturally.

"We're the next generation, there with the grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles and aunties."

50-60 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I'm proud. It makes me want to better myself too because if I'm seen as one of the young leaders... emerging, like upcoming leader or whatever. I do know that I'm a leader in my family... And there's a few of us like my sisters are leaders too within our families. I'm not saying I'm a leader for Children's Ground, but I come, I'm a part of a leadership group."

35-45 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I don't see myself as a leader. In fact, when it comes to Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal language and Aboriginal identity, I'm only a new chum. I'm only a beginner... I still need to walk that country mile."

65+ YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

"I want to be here, like as many young mums now, so I would like to become a young leader for Children's Ground, to support them with the little ones."

45-55 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Evidence presented in this section and throughout this report demonstrates that community leadership is occurring in many contexts – through intergenerational structures that place Elders as a key authority while also maintaining a focus on generational leadership development. Young people and adults are building their confidence and skills in a variety of leadership contexts, which is contributing to individual, family and community empowerment.

Intergenerational inclusion and safety

"It makes me really proud for what we are doing today at Children's Ground. It's a safe place. We call Children's Ground apmere [home] again, it's like an apmere for us and for the little ones."

65+ YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/FAMILY MEMBER, 2023

Creating intergenerational environments of safety, inclusion and development is key in the long-term strategy of increasing social, cultural and economic capital in communities. In a practical sense, this begins with a focus on place-based delivery. It's delivering in and with the community and being part of the fabric of social and community life.

Safety is an explicit standard of Children's Ground that is highlighted as part of daily operations and governance. The aim is to expand safety as a norm, expectation and lived reality and to model community and cultural standards. Figure 22 articulates key elements of what is sought with communities over time.

FIGURE 22: SAFETY AND INCLUSION

- **CULTURAL SAFETY.** Privileging the culture and identity of communities was effectively achieved and promoted by Children's Ground through the period of the evaluation.
- **PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY.** Violence and arguments are not accepted within the boundaries of Children's Ground. If breaches of these standards occur, they are managed by key cultural Elders and relevant families who together decide on the responses and resolution. There is a clear respect for these standards that are held in place by the community. People actively protect Children's Ground as a place of safety, inclusion and no argument.
- **INCLUSION.** Children's Ground is owned by and has a responsibility to the whole community within which it operates, reflecting cultural responsibilities in leadership and governance. It is not held by individuals or select groups, This is prioritised by First Nations governance.

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.

People reported that being and working alongside family makes Children's Ground safe for people of all ages, particularly noting the policy developed by First Nations people regarding children always engaging alongside their family.

People also talked about everyone knowing that Children's Ground is a place where families don't bring conflict or arguments, and that it can be a place where people come to feel safe. Many people connected safety to the extensive support provided by Children's Ground.

"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**

"...always a space for you at Children's Ground. And you can come in any time. If you don't feel safe at your house... The door has always been open."

**50-60 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

"It's a safe place for families and kids, because families and kids love coming over. This is a safe place for everyone."

**20-30 YEARS, MALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**



“Yes, it’s one of those spaces where – you don’t bring your dramas here. You can come and talk to someone, we’ll help, but this is where everyone feels safe, this is where they can come and either talk to someone, or just be around people and not have to worry about anything. Not just here, but even when they’re going out on sessions, you know that you can go to sessions and still feel safe. Whatever’s happening out there, Children’s Ground doesn’t tolerate any dramas and stuff because you’re putting everyone else at risk. And the fact that you don’t always have to be saying that; it’s just known.”

**30-40 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

“Well, I feel safe. They really help me a lot. Support, they support. That’s why I stay at Children’s Ground.”

**40-50 YEARS, FEMALE, FIRST NATIONS STAFF/
FAMILY MEMBER, 2023**

It remains too early to expect community level changes in safety and inclusion. However, throughout both evaluation periods, First Nations staff and family members continued to express their feelings of safety within Children’s Ground. Importantly, they also described how they hold Children’s Ground as a safe place for everyone.



SUMMARY

Evaluation evidence presented in this section and throughout the report demonstrates a reported increase from the first evaluation period in feelings of empowerment and leadership. Empowerment was evidenced by Interplay’s analysis as protective against negative life events.

Progress towards community-level change can be seen in the strengthening of local governance, intergenerational leadership, high engagement of children and families, cultural learning and transmission for people of all ages and in promoting and protecting safety for children and families.

Children’s Ground has experienced challenges with implementing place-based delivery to the extent intended. This has limited the building of social, economic and cultural capital and safety. Progress has been made with establishing intergenerational environments of inclusion and safety with children and families within Children’s Ground delivery environments, whether it be on country, at the central hub or other places.

Most importantly, the First Nations communities leading Children’s Ground are creating and holding places of safety for children and families and creating new pathways for children to have different life experiences. They are achieving this while living with persistent stress, trauma and grief.

The progress and outcomes evidenced throughout this report reflect determined leadership, cultural responsibility and the strength of families and communities. These are key foundations for long-term community level change.

4.6: FIRST NATIONS 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: *Anpernrirpirremenge 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.

Elders are the ones who pass on the knowledge. Children are learning, young people are learning, and families are learning, and everyone is teaching, even the children. This is how knowledge is passed on. Children must be connected to family and country. This is the best way to teach and learn.

Elders have been saying that we must focus on language and hold our culture strong. That we must bring this through the next generation.

They are worried it will be lost. They must be strong in our Arrernte learning to be strong in western learning. They go hand in hand.

Since Children's Ground started, now there is opportunity for learning language and culture and kids are picking it up.

In mainstream schools, our kids are too used to leaving their language and culture at the door. They can speak Arrernte and learn culture outside of school but have to go back to English and only western learning inside the classroom. It makes it hard for our kids. Hard for them to learn, hard to engage, hard to be successful.

The kids know what to do here [Children's Ground]. They belong here and are comfortable. All the little ones are waiting for the bus – they know what days we go to Children's Ground. It's consistent, it's our routine. We just keep building on what we are teaching them. It's happening more – every week we are taking them out bush to country. We keep growing it.

The kids are learning their language and culture, and they are also learning from the western educators. Children's Ground helps our children engage in mainstream school when they're ready. They know how to learn. They are confident.

FIRST LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL LEARNING

Kids and adults are surrounded by language and culture here. The little ones are picking up words just by being around it. They are now hearing Arrernte all around them and becoming familiar with it. Families are learning too because they are hearing it. Kids are speaking more Arrernte because of connection to country, even though they grew up speaking English.

Some kids are understanding Arrernte but not always speaking it. We need more kids learning how to read and write in Arrernte. Even though some kids are still speaking mixed up language, more Arrernte is coming through. That is positive. Language learning is happening, but we need to do more. We have the space to do it in learning but sometimes we are not always doing it intentionally.

For some kids, language is not improving. English is just everywhere.

On homelands (on country) you are all around families and Arrernte language. In town there is everything to distract like iPads, TV, tablets – and that's all in English. Families need to encourage kids to talk in Arrernte. Some kids prefer to stay at home with TV/technology. We need to get them off those technologies. It's hard to break that cycle. We also need to ask those kids on the streets why they are there, where they are from, connecting with them.

The focus for little ones is on Arrernte, like English learning will come after Arrernte learning. They are starting to pronounce Arrernte words better – they just keep learning.

Cultural learning is going well, but we need to do more, engage more young people. There is worry for all the kids and loss of culture. We need to make more learning resources and build on what we have already done. First Nations educators need time together to get their learning done – especially while the Elders are still alive.

Sometimes there are combined learning sessions. Where families from two communities run a session together so the kids can learn the family connections and relationships through kinship.

Learning in Arrernte is helping with the mind. It's how they [children] address how they feel. Like in white fella way they might do sand play or water play. For us it's different. Language and culture can bring the kids back. Same for old people. It triggers memories – like a flashlight – to their old days. We are teaching kids language for their safety too – physical and cultural safety. It's important for us as Aboriginal people, for our health and our mind.

We are getting more Elders. Men and women who have the knowledge. They have the stories. We need the Elders for language, even if they can't come in all the time. We need everyone together and teaching and learning from each other. Adults are with the kids and learning language and culture too. Young people need to be learning language too.

ON-COUNTRY TEACHING AND LEARNING

Different teachings are better to come from different people of different ages. The little ones learn from the older kids and the older kids are learning from the kids older than them. And at each age they are teaching kids younger than them. All kids learn from the adults and Elders. This is holistic. This makes sure all the kids and young people and adults are learning what they need to, from who they need to learn it from.

Sometimes culture can be taught in community centres or under a tree in community, but they're only some things. Cultural learning needs to be on country. It's about going out and being on actual country. Kids and people need to be on country to experience and learn. Learning about the plants and trees and touching and feeling these. And seeing and following the animal tracks. They need to go through other country to get to their country and learn the connections. So they learn that family line.

Kids are more focused on country. They are exploring out bush. That's how they learn. They are using all their senses in learning. When kids are learning in a classroom environment schools might see our kids as 'blank' or 'a problem', but it's the environment that is the problem. Our kids need to be 'out' at school not 'in' school.

INTERGENERATIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING

Kids and young people are learning different things and sometimes the same things from different people based on their relationship with each person. There are different things to learn about for the same things from different people.

Intergenerational teaching and learning shares the load. When everyone knows their teaching role and does that teaching, no individual gets exhausted. And you get the best of people. If it was just on one person, they would get exhausted. It gives people an opportunity to learn to teach in that safe environment too.

Adult learning is important here too. Adults are learning with the kids. People are feeling supported to go and do their own cultural learning and that is recognised as work and training by Children's Ground. They recognise cultural learning is important for all of us no matter what age.

Learning sessions are good to bring the young. Intergenerational learning is a safe way to learn. If they are there while the kids are learning it, they can learn it too. They don't have to say I don't know that. They don't have to feel shame. And there's safety in that for people. No one is made to feel inadequate or that they're not knowledgeable or not valued because they don't know all that Arrernte language or culture.

Older kids want to come with us too because of the learning environment – the way we teach. We teach Arrernte way – everyone together. Other services don't do learning on country. Intergenerational learning amongst children out bush is our way. Older kids are teaching younger ones too – it's their job to do that.

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.

Everyone is coming together for each other and supporting our children and families to make our culture and communities strong. Families are walking together. We are standing together – staying proud and strong. Families are standing together when presented with challenges.

We look after our Elders and support them too. It is important for them to lead, so we are checking in with them, bringing them in, taking old people on camps, getting them out of home. It makes everyone feel good about themselves to see Elders and family together. It makes Elders feel good to see other Elders.

More families are coming now – even mothers and mothers-to-be. A lot of people are getting involved – it’s intergenerational. We are seeing other family that we haven’t seen for a while.

More men are feeling more confident to come here to work every day. This is a big change. It’s not like before. We need to engage more men, more Elder men. We need to keep doing more walk and talk to ask them, to talk to them.

Young people are getting involved – it's another big change. Young people aren't just sitting at home – they are getting involved. We have created spaces for young people. We are paving the way for young people. They are more comfortable and confident – they can talk now. They have a say about everything we talk about.

We have a lot of women talking for community and some men. We need more men leaders and young men, and they need cultural learning too and to be talking for their community.

But we need to get more family involved. We need more walk and talk with all communities. For engagement and for employment. We want to see more young people involved. We need more cultural learning for young people. We are already doing it, but we need to do more. We still need to do more with young people on the streets. We need to support them. We need to recruit them. So they can own Children's Ground too. Young people are asking to be involved with fellas here, but we need more money to give them jobs and get them more involved with men here.

People are supporting each other and talking to families to increase engagement. We explain what Children's Ground is about. Tell them to come and see.

We are connecting families – everyone is getting together. Getting families together is a big achievement. We are seeing big changes for some families and staff.

Children's Ground is having a positive impact on people. It is giving people options. We are on the right path. It is making everyone support each other.

Nobody forces family to come here. Families and children have found the right place for their needs. They have connected – this is important. I don't worry about those families because they are here.



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.

People are being leaders. Role modelling for the next generation and teaching the next generation. There are a lot of role models around you – you get to practice. We need more role models in young people too.

Elders (Akngerrepate) are leading the way – teaching us what is right and wrong. They are teaching the young voices, the next generation. They are teaching for everyone at Children’s Ground – First Nations and non-First Nations.

Elders encourage others to learn so they can hand over. Children’s Ground makes sure there are a lot of opportunities to step up. People have faith in you and trust you and you are

valued. We are sharing the load. A lot of the Elders are tired, so we need to take some of their load. We need more shared leadership – listening to each other.

You feel like a leader coming here. People feel respected and proud. People are made to feel like their opinion matters, that what they say is important. It’s empowering. We are speaking up. If you don’t like things that are happening, we need to speak up. We are teaching young people to do it for themselves too.

Before Children’s Ground, lots of people were not used to speaking up in meetings, in governance. Now, people are getting more confidence, more opportunity.

There's support for everyone to be talking up and people are listening to us. Some people are saying they are leaders, and some are saying they're not there yet.

We are talking about all things. We talk about what is good and what is not – and doing it the way we want to. We are making decisions about our own lives and the lives of our families. It feels good inside to be heard.

We can do better with listening to Arrernte people. It's a two-way street. You can't stop listening until you have understood. Sometimes better communication is needed.

There are things we need to know more about. All of us [not just a few] need to know more about recruitment and positions and performance and giving people a chance to explain. We should know about everything in this space – what all the areas do.

We are doing our community planning. We talk about how it's going and then reporting back to our families. We have our data that we collect. We see where we are up to and how we are going. We are making our own evidence – our way, for us and our supporters, and to show government what we are changing.

A leader is different things, and you get labelled or branded by your people or by someone, you know. Not in a bad way. You don't always know you're a leader until someone tells you you're a leader and then you start acting like a leader. If you're at Children's Ground, you're working and automatically you're a leader.

There's a lot of ways to lead. Everyone is a leader. If not for your team – for your family you are. Someone who does things, more actions, more than talking, that's another leader. And through initiations [cultural ceremonies] and all that. There's a lot of different leaders.

People always say Children's Ground is always looking to encourage leaders, and support that. So, we do that well by giving everyone a chance to be part of meetings [external], not just always sending the directors. There are times when it can be an educator, and it can be another young person from here, it is always bringing everyone up. All the young ones are being encouraged too.

It gives people confidence to speak up more. It's hard when you're first put into that position, and especially if they're younger, and not just younger I think older women, or men, that wouldn't necessarily be front and centre. So, it gives them that confidence and validation.

Leadership is hard sometimes, but it makes me feel good. You have to take on that role and it's a hard job. You just have to drive through really. You have to take responsibility. It's hard to be a leader, but it's a good thing for people. You just do your best. It's helping people grow – stepping into a new space.



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 it our work our way.

We've seen people change from working here. It's a routine coming to work. We have a purpose. Young men are now working too, not just doing what other young fellas are doing. People are making a choice – they could go on Centrelink. People are happy and proud to be working here.

You've got to have First Nations staff to be First Nations-led. We have staff from the different communities. It's important to see someone from community with language, with culture, with lived experience, leading us here. These are the right people for the job. Not just someone who just has a qualification.

We are recognised and honoured and respected for being an Aboriginal person. We are seen as people who are wanted. People are feeling valued for their language and culture.

Here we are paid for our cultural knowledge. We're so used to organisations not having that cultural knowledge to create change.

Mainstream places don't see our strengths and ability. Here we employ people with language and culture. We employ young people. People can't always get work at other places where you have to have paper/qualifications. Here cultural knowledge is recognised because it's a necessary skill and needed for teaching the kids.

Us mob working here make us [Children's Ground] culturally safe. It's important for learning culture and Arrernte too. It's important for our country. It's important for our Elders and us making the decisions.

We do the walk and talking with our families to bring people in. This job is more than just being a teacher. Not just a language teacher, but culture too.

We are teaching the kids, so they don't miss out – from babies, from the start.

People are feeling really proud of themselves and their work. All Arrernte people should be proud. We are working hard at Children's Ground to keep our culture strong. Working here we are role models for other adults and young people and families and kids. Families are working as role models. It's a big change – makes the kids feel happy.

This person felt shy when they saw everyone working at CG. Then they got more confidence once they started working and they don't feel shy anymore.

Sometimes people feel overtired and stretched. Looking after yourself is important. We need more people working so we can share the load.

When we were smaller this was a bit easier. It feels like we rush more now. More people now, more groups, more adults mean it's busier. We are always trying to get better. But there is not enough money for more employment, but we need more of us working here. When the money comes in, it opens up and makes more opportunities for people.

We do a lot of training, but we need more. We need some accredited training in teaching and health that builds on our cultural knowledge. It gives us more options.

We get a lot of support for things here. In this organisation, people know that it is not just that one employee, but their family too that needs support. It helps people to work when Children's Ground can help support family too.

Here we see the importance of family and culture. We have that flexibility. Like, it's better for me to not work when my kids are on school holidays, otherwise I have to work to pay for care. I'd rather be with them than pay someone else.

Also, Children's Ground is different to mainstream – we get support, time off for sorry and grieving. First Nations people lose a lot more family members than non-First Nations. We can lose 20-30 people a year, and it's getting worse. We are supported to attend funerals and sorry. But we should get more allowance for this. Funding should be increased so we can get supported to take sorry leave to go for how long we need.

Here, people can choose what they want to do and follow what they have to do culturally. This is part of why people keep referring to CG being different. And people wanting to be a part of it.



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. Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe apmere arteke akeme. Mwerre anwerne awelheme anwerneke artweye areye uthene urrkapentyakngerre arrpenhe areye aremele urrkapentye ikwereke apetyeltaneme arltengarltenge. 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's Ground is a safe place. Everyone has stress and issues from their lives, but they still come in and we all work together. People now have a job and a safe place to go where they have a purpose and it's making a difference in their lives, and CG has given them that.

It's important that this is a safe place. You hear people say to other families not to bring their problems here, this is apmere [home], this is a safe place for everybody to work in and be at. These are the rules people made.

People talk about how there can be conflicts between families in communities, but that Children's Ground is that safe place and it's got safety that everybody respects. We don't want problems brought here. We have enough problems at home.

Being at work is like a break, a rest from that stress for staff and families coming in. People come in and they don't argue about things going on in communities.

People respect the rules because they were made from the old people. People all hold up their end of the agreement.

Keeping Children's Ground as a safe place is across everyone and everyone's on board with it. Children's Ground is safe because it's people's safe place too. They can't then abuse that rule that they have asked for. We might have families arguing but this is the one place where people don't, because people want that safe place.

Safety is in the flexibility. People feel safe because they don't need to worry about losing their job. Funerals, sickness, car problems, housing inspections – these are some of the biggest reasons for people being away from work.



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.

MWERREWNERE IRREPIRREME: *Anwernele areme ampe areye arle mwerrewerne anteme aneme. Amparle tyerrtye atyepatyepa neme, merne mwerre arlkwemenge. Itne mwerre akaltirreme. Itne akaltie anteme iwenhe merne mwerre, iltie alewelhetyeke arlke. Itneke artweye arle akaltirreme nthakenhthakenhe ampe itnekenhe amangelhiletayeke 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.

Children's Ground supports everybody, the communities, your environment. This is very important. It's not just about doing your job. It's the community development. Everything is here to help families. If you work elsewhere, you don't get that support.

We have funding for everything – not just one thing. It's holistic. We don't focus on just one thing, it's everything, it's all integrated. We have the broader picture of what everyone needs. We have done this for many years ourselves before western systems.

There are people here we can all talk to and get support. Families are getting the support they need. We can work through one thing at a time – all different worries and problems people have.

Social/emotional is a good support. It's important that when you are ready you can access it. You don't have to wait to be referred. It is all here, in-house. If you have any worries, you can get help here.

There's a lot more help for health for kids and families now. We got more money and it went up. We didn't have that much money and people back then [last evaluation period]. And that's been big.

People are being supported to talk about their health and get help. People are talking a lot more about health. We have been building this slowly. There is good role modelling at Children's Ground around health.

Healthy routines are big changes for kids. They know how to do it and they encourage each other. They know their routines even more than they used to. Kids are cooking on country now. They are cutting up their own vegetables in nutrition program. It's really good to see kids learning and doing it themselves so young. Their bodies are growing. They drink a lot more water. They are eating veggies – they are trying them as they cut them.

Kids have better behaviour. They are more settled. They are sharing together and taking turns. They are stronger in emotional health.

Using their minds more on their activities. Using their imagination and making little stories about what they are doing. Cultural learning is helping behaviour and social/emotional wellbeing. People are getting good access to services as well. Services are working together for people – coordinating appointments and transport. Before, people were missing appointments – but now there are people to support.

Support is different here. You don't have to wait for appointments, waiting around all the time. There is always someone here to help you. Someone will step in. This is teamwork.



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.

APWERTE, 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.

Children's Ground is open about money and what it is for. It is good that First Nations staff go to the government meetings and then they can share that money story with family and other staff. This is leadership – going to these meetings and talking to big people.

But not everyone knows what the money story is. People need to know about the levels and responsibilities and what funding contributes to and why. People need to see which sections have what money so everyone understands. People get frustrated being left behind in the money story because they don't know why we can't do things – why we can and can't recruit in different areas.

Our funders are important. They are helping us do things our way. More funding means more opportunity.

We only get a little bit of funding from government. We need more government funding to show them it's working. We are still in early days but it's working.

We meet with the funders. Our First Nations staff and funders together. It's good they can come for a look themselves. We can show the funders that Children's Ground is working for families and the way that families want it to be.

They [funder visits] help with people understanding the money story. They show where and who the money comes from. It puts power in the people's hands because we know we are part of making money too, we're not just sitting back. We're out there sharing our stories and sharing why it's important to us and the difference it's making in people's lives – it gives us that ownership too. People are growing in confidence in these visits and getting an opportunity.

People are very used to other people telling their story. At Children's Ground you can talk for yourself with funders and government. It's important we have an opportunity to meet with funders and our team knowing about the funding and the people.

It's about a bigger story of what First Nations people want and how it can work. No matter how many times government try, it doesn't work.

Our kids feel like they belong – they own it. We want to stay for a generation. Our experience has showed our [First Nations] organisations don't always last – funding is cut and things shut down. But we hope Children's Ground will. We want the next generation to see Children's Ground as a good place to work and be.



4.7: WESTERN IMPACT ANALYSIS: WHAT CHANGE AND IMPACT OCCURRED WITHIN AMPE-KENHE AHELHE?

WHAT PROGRESS OCCURRED WITHIN AMPE-KENHE AHELHE TOWARDS LONGER TERM IMPACT?

This second three-year evaluation evidenced that the CG Approach is achieving impact for children, families and community in key areas that impact long term wellbeing. Children's Ground built on and is starting to consolidate the early-stage impact evidenced in the first three-year delivery and evaluation of 2017 to 2019.

Notwithstanding the limitation of the growth model and the challenges of COVID-19, after six years, key outcome measures for children, family and community are showing trends towards long term change.

The CG Approach has been successful in engaging children and families in early learning where engagement has previously been very low. Evidence also shows that children are progressing in their cultural and western learning, health and wellbeing.

A key condition for change, families walking alongside their children, is being achieved. Not only are they connected to their children's learning and wellbeing, but families are also experiencing improved outcomes. Evidence shows improved social and cultural connection, health promotion engagement and economic strengthening through employment and financial supports. While whole of community change can only be measured over the long-term, key conditions for change are being seen. One of the most striking impacts is in local governance and empowerment.

This, along with a critical mass of engagement and reports of improved access, engagement and wellbeing are all positive developments.

The key progress measures for this period were access and engagement across the service platform. This includes the critical suite of culturally centred services for children and families, in environments where this has been historically poor or non-existent.

Key areas of impact include increased access to equitable, culturally safe and centred education, health, employment and governance for children, young people and families. This contributed to increased engagement of children and families in all areas of the CG Approach, which has seen a new normal emerging for children and families.

This evaluation demonstrates that Children's Ground was able to reduce common service access barriers for children and families, resulting in ongoing upward trends in service engagement. Service engagement is improving with Children's Ground and in partnership with other local services.

After six years, there is now a consistent experience of early childhood, nutrition, health and wellbeing promotion and environments where local community are the key decision makers and where children now see local family members employed routinely.

There were periods of lower engagement across the three years due to the impact of COVID-19 and persistent grief, loss and sorry business. However, evaluation evidence shows that engagement returned to expected levels. Impact, reach and quality were affected by a lack of all the resources required to implement the full approach. The full CG Approach will extend the effective outcomes that have already been achieved and is critical for sustaining and strengthening quality and impact.

This section presents an analysis of the key impact findings and evidence within the context of broader western evidence of leading practice to improve outcomes for First Nations children, families and communities.

First language and culture first is protective and enabling

The CG Approach is designed as a First Nations approach to minimise assimilation and strengthen the culturally protective factors for children's development and wellbeing through life. Strengthening first language and culture was articulated as the primary outcome by Elders, who recognised this as underpinning other social, emotional and cultural outcomes. Establishing this from early childhood is considered a critical preventative strategy.

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that children in the four communities leading the CG Approach are growing up within First Nations approaches to learning, health and development.

Key First Nations systems and practices including learning in first language, on-country learning, and learning through responsibilities for kinship and country, are enabling children to grow up with their cultural identity and knowledge. For these children and families, this is the first time since colonisation that this has been available in a structured early learning service.

Child learning and wellbeing progress data presented demonstrated that children who are strong in their first cultural learning and knowledge are further developed in key domains of western learning (reading and writing), general communication, social/emotional wellbeing, perseverance and overall development.

The standards established by Elders respond to western and cultural evidence that highlights both the risks and positive protective factors for development and wellbeing.



Assimilation, cultural oppression and structural racism are all a norm for First Nations people in Australia. The negative impact of racism and structural and systemic racism on health and wellbeing is increasingly evidenced through research.^{129 130} Furthermore, it has been noted that early childhood services that are not culturally responsive can have a harmful effect on children and contribute to assimilation and the loss of culture and wellbeing.¹³¹ It is also recognised that first language and systems that include First Nations knowledge and practice have positive benefits for First Nations children's learning and health.¹³²



129 Kairuz, CA; Casanelia, LM; Bennett-Brook, K. *et al.* 2021. Impact of racism and discrimination on physical and mental health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples living in Australia: a systematic scoping review. *BMC Public Health* 21, 1302. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11363-x>.

130 Paula, A; Braveman, PA; Elaine Arkin, E; Proctor, D; Kauh, T; Holm, N. 2022. [Systemic And Structural Racism: Definitions, Examples, Health Damages, And Approaches To Dismantling](#) *Health Affairs* 41:2, 171-178.

131 Elek, C; Gubhaju, L; Lloyd-Johnsen, C; Eades, S; Goldfeld, S. 2020. Can early childhood education programs support positive outcomes for indigenous children? A systematic review of the international literature; *Educational Research Review*; Volume 31, November 2020, 100363.

132 Miller AC; Flood, D; Tschida, S; Douglas, K; Rohloff, P. 2024. Assessing child development scores among minority and Indigenous language versus dominant language speakers: a cross-sectional analysis of national Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. www.thelancet.com/lancetgh. Vol 12.

McTurk, et al. (2008) undertook a comprehensive review of western evidence relating to school readiness, assessment, risk and protective factors and interventions and its implications for schooling for First Nations children in Australia. Their research identified that the following factors support the engagement and success of First Nations children in education¹³³:

- High quality early childhood education and learning-rich environments.
- Home visit health programs.
- Local Aboriginal staff.
- Community ownership of programs.
- Parent engagement.
- Inclusion of Elders and extended family structures.
- Community-based early interventions.

This evaluation demonstrates that the CG Approach has incorporated each of these and more across both the first and second evaluation periods – and that they are being evidenced as important foundations of and drivers for long-term change.

The review by McTurk, et al does not incorporate the importance of children learning their first language before learning subsequent languages.

The World Bank¹³⁴ and UNESCO^{135 136} have recognised the critical importance of children learning in their first language, or mother tongue, linking first language learning to greater success in educating children as well as contributing more broadly to the country's economic, social and political life.

“When children are first taught in a language that they speak and understand well they learn more, are better placed to learn other languages, are more likely to stay in school, and enjoy a school experience appropriate to their culture and local circumstances”.¹³⁷

The importance of children learning in their first language through their early years is reinforced through the international evidence.



¹³³ McTurk, N; Nutton, G; Lea, T; Robinson, G; Carapetis, J. 2008. The School Readiness of Australian Indigenous Children: A Review of the literature; Charles Darwin University; Menzies School of Health Research.

¹³⁴ 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.

¹³⁵ 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.

¹³⁶ UNESCO. 2021. Global action plan of the international decade of indigenous languages (IDIL2022-2032).

¹³⁷ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.

Burns et al (2021) state that:

*“The literature establishes that a child’s language development begins before birth and precedes the beginning of formal education. For this reason, the first place of learning is the home, under the guidance of parents and family. Therefore, on entering a school system, a young child already has a base of knowledge and can communicate competently in many ways. However, often the child’s communicative competence in some aspects contrasts with the standards of school culture”.*¹³⁸

Burns’s reflections are consistent with the experience of Children’s Ground community leaders, who highlight the sense of failure that their children experience in the mainstream schooling system. L. Gorey (dec), a founder of Children’s Ground, regularly raised the risks experienced by Aboriginal children in mainstream education stating:

“Children who are going to mainstream schools are being forced to leave their identity, culture and language at the door.”

L. GOREY (DEC), SENIOR CULTURAL EDUCATOR CHILDREN’S GROUND, 2018

This is supported by UNESCO, which approximates that 40% of learners worldwide do not have access to education in their home language.¹³⁹ Further, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank suggests that as high as 90% of children may fail to acquire foundation skills in literacy and numeracy without first language instruction in learning and in their recommendations highlight:

¹³⁸ Burns, S; Jules, J. 2021. Early Learning Environments: Embracing and Valuing Home Languages, chapter in Transformative Pedagogical Perspectives on Home Language Use in Classrooms. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-4075-6.ch010.

¹³⁹ UNESCO. 2001. Education and Cultural Diversity www.unesco.org/education.

*“The importance of incorporating children’s home languages into their formal learning environment during the first eight years of life”.*¹⁴⁰

Evaluation evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that Children’s Ground is establishing both culturally and linguistically centred learning that is engaging children, young people and families in first language and cultural learning. In turn, this is strengthening the connection to their identity, country and culture. Literacy in first languages and English were established as key learning outcomes for children.

Beyond education, self-determination and empowerment, cultural identity, family and kinship, country and responsibilities, knowledge and beliefs, language and participation in cultural practices are also key determinants of health and wellbeing for First Nations people. This is supported by increasing evidence nationally and globally.^{141 142}

Bourke et al (2018) state:

*“There is evidence that cultural factors – Country and caring for Country, knowledge and beliefs, language, self-determination, family and kinship, and cultural expression – can be protective, and positively influence First Nations people’s health and wellbeing”.*¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ 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.

¹⁴¹ Mayi Kuwayu Study; <https://mkstudy.com.au/>.

¹⁴² World Health Organisation. 2024. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/global-plan-of-action-for-health-of-indigenous-peoples>.

¹⁴³ Bourke, S; Wright, A; Guthrie, J; Russell, L. 2018. Evidence Review of Indigenous Culture for Health and Wellbeing. The International Journal of Health Wellness and Society 8(4):11-27. DOI:10.18848/2156-8960/CGP/v08i04/11-27.

This is supported by international evidence which has found that cultural continuity and empowerment is a protective factor against youth suicide.¹⁴⁴

Evaluation evidence thoroughly demonstrated that Children's Ground increased access to cultural learning and wellbeing for children, young people and adults. Opportunities to connect with and participate in cultural life were evidenced as key drivers and enablers of engagement and impact. Particularly in this second evaluation period, the strong theme from First Nations staff/family evaluation interviews demonstrated the impact of culturally-based roles that value people's strengths and do not require a western qualification. This has been a significant enabler for Children's Ground's achievement of extensive community-based First Nations employment. First Nations employment has impacted engagement in governance and engagement across all areas of delivery of the CG Approach.

After six years of delivery, there is now a group of children who have grown up with Children's Ground, learning through their first language and culture, surrounded by their families and experiencing their family leading and working. Their culture, language and identity are valued. They are not living with the same tension of cultural dissonance from birth in the way their families have faced throughout life. As Children's Ground's evidence and research continue, understanding the lifelong impact of increased cultural freedom and wellbeing in childhood will be an important contribution to the evidence.

Child development, learning and wellbeing improving

Building on the first evaluation, there is a new and continuing cohort of children who are experiencing and engaging in early learning and health promotion as a normal part of their everyday life.

Longitudinal research found a correlation between high quality early years learning and improved development, education, mental health, economic and social outcomes through life.^{145 146 147 148}



144 Chandler, MJ; Lalonde, CE. 2008. Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor against Suicide in First Nations Youth. *Horizons --A Special Issue on Aboriginal Youth, Hope or Heartbreak: Aboriginal Youth and Canada's Future*. 10(1), 68-72.

- 145 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2015. Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development: working paper. Cat. no. CWS 53. Canberra: AIHW.
- 146 Sylva, K; Melhuish, E; Sammons, P; Siraj-Blatchford, I; Taggart, B. 2004. *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from pre-school to end of key stage 1*. Nottingham, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skills.
- 147 Arnold, C; Bartlett, K; Gowani, S; Merali, R. 2007. *Is everybody ready? Readiness, transition and continuity: Reflections and moving forward*. Working Paper 41. Bernard van Leer Foundation: The Hague, The Netherlands.
- 148 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.

As evidenced in the Centre for Community Child Health's recent review, 'Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice', the following conditions for children are essential for young children to flourish, including the key features of the social and physical environments in which young children and their families live that are important for optimal development and functioning¹⁴⁹:

- Secure relationships with primary caregivers able to provide the responsive caregiving needed to build secure attachments.
- Support for developing emotional and self-regulation skills.
- Positive early learning environments, in the home as well as in early childhood education and care and community settings.
- Opportunities to mix with other children of different ages, and to build social skills.
- Adequate and appropriate nutrition from conception onwards.
- Support to establish regular sleep and health care patterns.
- Physical opportunities to play and explore.
- Protection from relationship and other stressors – abuse and neglect by caregivers, exposure to family or community violence.
- Children's and family services need to wrap around a model of engaging children, from birth to all ages and stages, in high quality learning situations.

This evaluation demonstrated that children actively engaged with Children's Ground have regularly experienced the core care conditions essential for them to grow, develop and flourish.

149 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>.

Evaluation data and First Nations staff/family members reports demonstrated increased engagement of families with their children in positive and safe intergenerational environments and with their immediate and extended family members. The intergenerational nature of these environments is congruent with First Nations approaches to child-family attachment which encourages strong attachments between children and multiple family members as key caregivers. Regular engagement in intergenerational environments has also been evidenced as important for older children to enact their cultural responsibilities of caring for and teaching younger children.

Children's health and wellbeing (physical, social/emotional, cultural) is fully integrated into all learning and social environments.

Data presented throughout this report demonstrates that children are increasing their nutritional intake, self-regulation, social/emotional wellbeing and physical health and wellbeing. It also demonstrates that children are building health knowledge and exhibiting healthy behaviours and health agency from their earliest years.



This includes infants and young children who are engaging in targeted maternal and child health supports.

Evaluation evidence shows that, through Children's Ground, children and their families are actively engaging with wrap around holistic services and supports that are integrated universally into early learning and in targeted ways with individuals, households and family groups.

There have been family reports that the activities children are engaging in at Children's Ground are translating into home environments for some children. At this stage, this is considered only an emerging theme from family reports, not a clear evaluation finding.

At home and in communities, many children continue to be exposed to stressors that are known to negatively impact child development, learning and wellbeing. Addressing these care conditions is the long-term strategy of Children's Ground's 25-year approach. Due to a history of racism, inequity, exclusion and disempowerment of First Nations people, it is expected to take a generation, at least, to shift this and see future generations of children grow into young people and adults and become families in communities where adverse childhood experiences are present for only a minority, not a majority of children.

Importantly, as outlined by Moore, et al (2024), *"...the core care conditions have a cumulative synergistic impact – the more we can put in place, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes"*.¹⁵⁰ Building the CG Approach around children in their early years has enabled Children's Ground to have a dedicated focus on responding to the diverse and complex needs of children and their families – making foundational changes for children and families through increased access, engagement and positive experiences.

Over six years, Children's Ground has seen a new cohort of children engage in early childhood education, health and wellbeing – children who had previously never or rarely engaged.

This second evaluation report also evidenced that this has been maintained with the next cohort of children engaging in early learning as a new norm.



¹⁵⁰ 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>.

Whole of family and community creating a new reality for children

'Families walking alongside their children' is a headline indicator for this evaluation, set by First Nations Elders and community leaders from the outset. This evaluation demonstrated that Children's Ground made progress with supporting families to walk alongside their children in multiple ways.

This was evidenced by increased family engagement in learning and health promotion alongside their children and increased intergenerational engagement of whole families – children, young people, adults and Elders. It has also been evidenced by First Nations staff and family members reporting and articulating not only increased engagement, but also the importance of this.

Increased engagement in employment through Children's Ground has seen families walking alongside their children and young people as the next generation leaders.

Increased engagement and confidence in governance and decision-making has seen families become invested in the design, delivery and evaluation of their collective efforts to change the future for the next generation of children.

The increased engagement of families shows that Children's Ground is making important progress in this key determinant for child development and wellbeing.

Western evidence shows that home environments and families are the most important influences on children's early development and learning.^{151 152 153} For children who face adverse childhood experiences, key relationships, stability and safety can be critical in preventing long term negative impact.¹⁵⁴ The Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016) recommends a focus not only on the home conditions for children but the capability and wellbeing of the key adults in the life of the child to achieve improved outcomes, also stating that:

"For children to do well, their families have to do well. And for families to do well, their community must do well".¹⁵⁵



151 OECD. 2020. Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States, OECD Publishing, Paris.

152 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>.

153 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.

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

155 *ibid*

The Centre for Community Child Health's recent review, 'Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice', identified the following evidence-based core care conditions that parents and families need in order to meet their children's needs¹⁵⁶:

- Positive social support networks (including support from family, friends, fellow parents and neighbours).
- Safe and easily accessible places to meet other families.
- Secure time to build relationship with the newborn (paid maternity/paternity leave).
- Access to relationally-based family-centred services.
- Access to universal services during antenatal/perinatal/postnatal periods.
- Access to specialist support services to address additional personal needs (e.g. mental health issues, relational violence).
- Information about child care and development, and support for managing the challenges of parenting.
- Availability of learning opportunities to build personal capabilities.
- Inclusiveness of the immediate social environment – absence of racism or discrimination.
- Employment opportunities and family-friendly employment conditions.

Evidence throughout this evaluation report demonstrated that Children's Ground effectively engaged and supported families in each of the core care conditions.

¹⁵⁶ 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>.

Children's Ground families reported improved family relationships and networks for themselves and their children. Children's Ground as a place of safety was also evidenced through staff and family reports. Collectively, these increased access to safe places and strengthened social connections for individuals, families and communities. Employment, place-based delivery, local governance and community events have also created a range of opportunities for social connectedness between families and communities.

A focus on creating places of safety, inclusion, cultural and community celebration are deliberate strategies of the CG Approach and were evidenced as drivers for connection and engagement.

For First Nations people, social connection is intrinsically linked to kinship systems that connect people, culture, law and country. Creating environments to strengthen, respect and honour these relationships contributes to improved cultural life, cultural engagement, knowledge and practices. Building on these cultural strengths in families has rekindled a cultural connection in some young people and adults, which has translated into increased strength in families. As noted earlier in this section, cultural wellbeing is an important protective factor for people of all ages.

Local First Nations employment increased during this evaluation period and was evidenced as positively impacting individuals and family groups. The economic home environment has significant influence on child life outcomes.¹⁵⁷ Studies show that jobless families experience lower socioeconomic status, negatively impacting educational attainment, health, safety and access to basic services. Children living in a jobless family fare worse in terms of educational, social and health outcomes.^{158 159}

¹⁵⁷ Cooper, K; Stewart, K. 2021. Does Household Income Affect Children's Outcomes? A Systematic Review of the Evidence. *Child Ind Res* 14, 981–1005.

¹⁵⁸ Baxter, J; Gray, M; Hand, K; Hayes, A. 2012. Parental joblessness, financial disadvantage and the wellbeing of parents and children, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹⁵⁹ Marmot, M. 2017. The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World: the argument. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 1312–1318.

Children's Ground's flexible, no barriers approach to employment has continued to enable people to engage in employment who had never or rarely worked.

Regular engagement in training and employment support provided ongoing opportunities for First Nations staff, including both western and cultural learning and development. The personal and professional development articulated by First Nations staff cannot be overstated. It contributed to growing confidence and knowledge. The high retention of local First Nations staff is evidence of a supportive employment environment, which has also been articulated extensively by First Nations staff throughout this report. This supported families in key core conditions impacting children's learning, development and wellbeing, and establishing a new common experience of employed and empowered adult role models for children and young people.

For many children, seeing their family working is their new normal, even for people working relatively few hours per week.

With unemployment and under-employment being generational for many First Nations families, children seeing employment within their families is a significant change. This has increased since the first evaluation period, with more children experiencing this reality. For children born into Children's Ground, whose family are employed with Children's Ground – seeing their family working has been their only reality.



Child Learning & Wellbeing data showed that children who have a parent/carer employed with Children's Ground are progressing further in their learning and wellbeing on key developmental domains of literacy, numeracy, communication, social/emotional wellbeing and cultural learning domains, compared with children who do not have a parent/carer working at Children's Ground.

Children's Ground's strength-based approach has been a critical enabler for families walking alongside their children, particularly in learning, employment and governance.

Families don't come to Children's Ground because they have a problem. They reportedly come to engage and connect with other families, to work and to lead this change for their children. This changes the relationship people have with services by shifting the power from traditional top-down service systems to bottom-up services delivered with and by people, which empowers rather than disempowers. This has been a significant driver of engagement.

While it may not always be the primary reason that people engage with Children's Ground, evaluation evidence demonstrates that families are actively engaging in services and supports to address health, economic, child, parenting, family, community, social and cultural worries they do have. As evidenced by staff and local service providers, Children's Ground provides holistic and integrated services that allows multiple entry points for engagement to address a range of family needs.

This evaluation suggests that one of the key drivers for success in the CG Approach is services and supports that are relational and family centred, with staff afforded the time and flexibility to build relationships of trust with children and families as an enabler for deep and sustained engagement.

The Centre for Community Child Health's review (2024) also identified a series of 'shared child and family core care conditions' that include secure and affordable housing, healthy and safe physical and built environments, healthy food environments and inclusivity (absence of racism or discrimination), to name a few.¹⁶⁰ These are also considered essential core care conditions required for children, families and communities to flourish. Children's Ground can only have an indirect impact on these broader conditions by empowering and advocating within the service system. This is a contribution to building agency over time, with some people reporting increased confidence and knowledge for self-advocacy.

As Children's Ground continues to work towards the 25-year strategy of place-based, in-community intergenerational centres of safety, health and wellbeing, it is anticipated that greater impact can be achieved in relation to these shared core care conditions for children, families and whole communities.



¹⁶⁰ 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>.

Improved health access, wellbeing and healing

Children's Ground's Family Health and Wellbeing Framework, *Health in the Hands of the People*, focuses on preventative health and responds to the key priorities identified both at a global and national level to achieve positive health outcomes for First Nations people.^{161 162}

"Indigenous Peoples' concept of health and well-being is holistic and encompasses spiritual, environmental, cultural, and social dimensions in addition to physical and mental health. They view health as both an individual and a collective right, strongly determined by community, land and the natural environment. Indigenous Peoples' approach to health is a balance of spirituality, traditional medicine, biodiversity and the interconnectedness of all that exists. This leads to an understanding of humanity in a significantly different manner from that of mainstream society".¹⁶³

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION, 2023

¹⁶¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework: summary report March 2024. AIHW: Australian Government.

¹⁶² World Health Organisation. 2023. Seventy-Sixth World Health Assembly Agenda item 16.3.

¹⁶³ World Health Organisation. 2024. Global Plan of Action for the Health of Indigenous Peoples. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/global-plan-of-action-for-health-of-indigenous-peoples>.

Health in the Hands of the People is also in line with a human rights approach by addressing the well evidenced cultural, social and economic determinants of health, as stated by June Oscar, (the then) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner:

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

JUNE OSCAR, ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMISSIONER, 2018.

In addition to the broader social and cultural determinants embedded in the CG Approach, the place-based targeted and universal approaches to health and wellbeing align with leading practice as outlined in western evidence.^{164 165}

Over the evaluation period, increased resourcing resulted in a significant increase in delivery of and engagement in cultural health, health promotion, maternal and child health, nutrition, social and emotional wellbeing and environmental health.

With COVID-19 dominating during the evaluation period, extensive preventative health was mobilised throughout to mitigate the serious risks facing the community. In turn, this increased health literacy in relation to transmissible disease, health planning for prevention and improved health behaviours particularly in relation to individual and home hygiene.

164 Moore, TG; Fry, R. 2011. Place-based approaches to child and family services: A literature review. Parkville, Victoria: Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.

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

Globally, First Nations peoples experience high rates of preventable disease, face significant barriers in accessing medical services and have a significant lower life expectancy and reduced quality of life compared with non-First Nations people. This has resulted in a call for a global action plan by the World Health Organisation.¹⁶⁶ The global conditions reflect the realities of many First Nations people across Australia.

The pervasive and chronic ill health experienced by First Nations people of all ages in Australia is widely understood.¹⁶⁷ First Nations children's burden of health is far greater than other children in Australia.¹⁶⁸ Children and adults experience a concerning level of preventable illnesses and disability which worsen the more remote people live.¹⁶⁹

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) analysis of ABS health survey data from 2017 to 2019 estimated that just under 3 in 10 (29%) First Nations adults aged 18–64 were in good health.¹⁷⁰ Analysing the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people it was found that a set of five social determinants explain around 35% of the health gap, with the largest impact due to differences in employment status and hours worked (14% of the health gap), equivalised household income (13%) and highest level of school attainment (8.9%). A further 30% of the gap was due to selected health risk factors, the largest impact due to smoking status (13% of the health gap) and overweight and obesity status (11%).¹⁷¹ This evaluation evidenced impact in both the key determinants outlined by the AIHW analysis as well as direct health literacy and service engagement for adults within families.

166 World Health Organisation. 2023. Seventy-Sixth World Health Assembly Agenda item 16.3.

167 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2020. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2020 summary report. Cat. no. IHPF 2. Canberra: AIHW.

168 *ibid*

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

170 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. *Determinants of health for First Nations people*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/social-determinants-and-indigenous-health>.

171 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. Australia's health 2024: data insights: Size and sources of the health gap for Australia's First Nations people 2017–2019 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/health-gap-2017-2019>.

Children's Ground has laid important foundations for positive health and wellbeing for children. This was achieved through the deliberate strategy of focusing on preventative and targeted health and wellbeing in the context of social and cultural determinants of health.

The AIHW's (2024) recent report states that "...enhanced health services and continued improvement in, and access to, comprehensive, culturally appropriate and safe primary health care services are needed to support improvements in the health and reduce the burden of disease among First Nations people".¹⁷²



¹⁷² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework: summary report March 2024. AIHW: Australian Government.

This is supported by findings from the Australian Government's 2017 national consultations with First Nations people. Titled 'My life my lead', the consultations collated stories and experiences from First Nations people about the integral and supportive role culture plays, and how social factors such as education, employment, justice, income and housing impact on a person's health and wellbeing at each stage of life¹⁷³. Four main themes were identified from the consultations:

1. Culture is central to the wellbeing of First Nations people and needs to be an integral part of First Nations-specific services and mainstream services.
2. Racism within health and other systems must be addressed to remove barriers and achieve better outcomes in health, education, and employment.
3. The effects of trauma across generations of First Nations people must be acknowledged and addressed.
4. Governments need to support long-term, coordinated, placed-based approaches.

These consultations informed the development of the Government's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023 (Implementation Plan).¹⁷⁴ They are also reflected in the more recent Australian Government National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2031 which centres and emphasises the cultural and social determinants of health and places culture at the heart of health,¹⁷⁵ as seen in Figure 23.

Alongside this are the 2021-2031 national plan 12 key priority areas in four streams for achieving health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Evaluation evidence in this report demonstrates that Children's Ground is making progress and seeing early impact in all the Australian Government's priority areas.

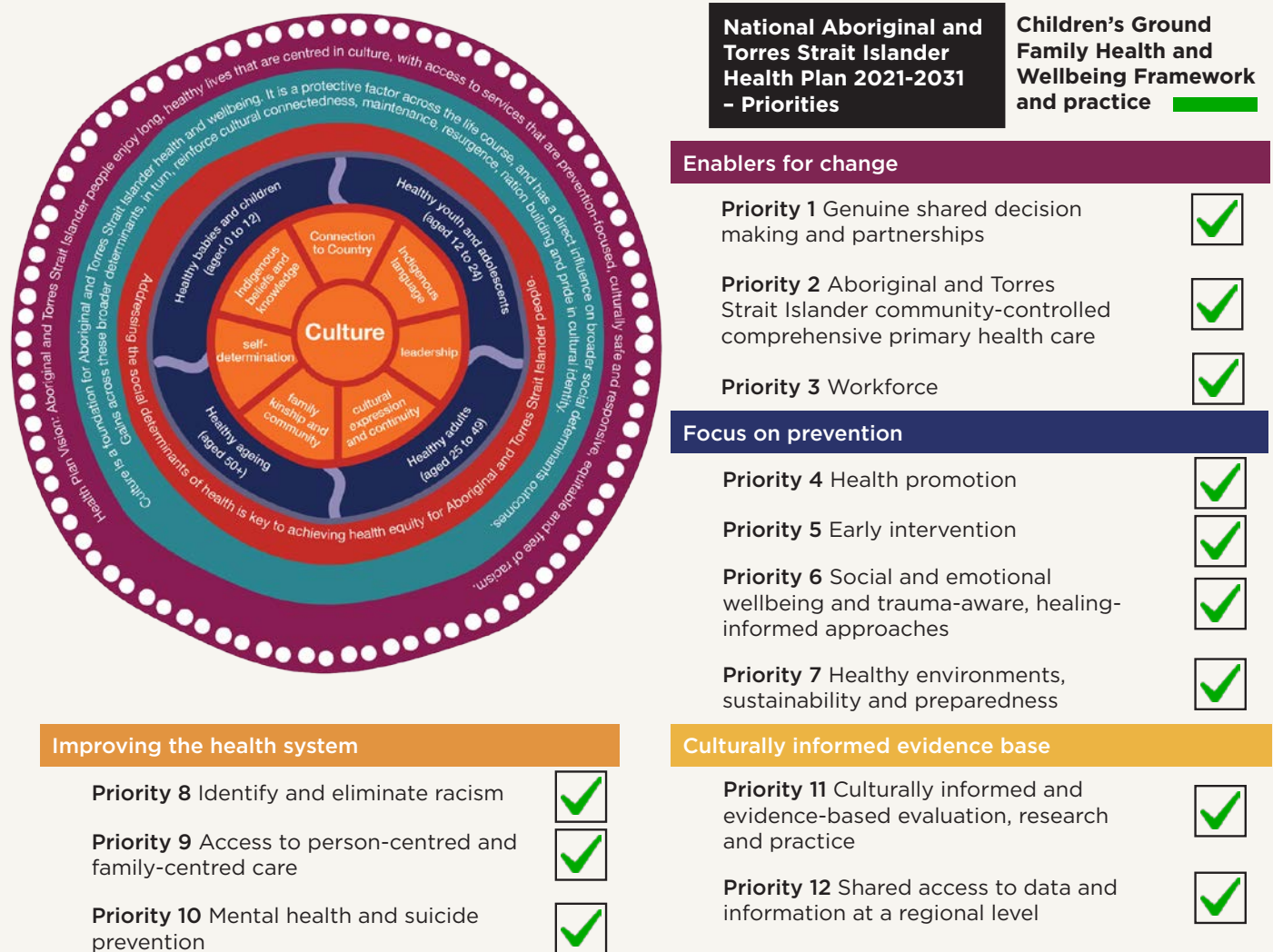


¹⁷³ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Health, My Life My Lead - Opportunities for strengthening approaches to the social determinants and cultural determinants of Indigenous health: Report on the national consultations December 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Department of Health, Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013–2023, Australian Government, Canberra, 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Australian Government Department of Health. 2021. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031.

FIGURE 23: NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH PLAN 2021-2031



Children’s Ground’s integration of health within early childhood delivery alongside targeted maternal and child health promotion is a significant driver in preventive health.

Western evidence shows that health promotion and targeting risk factors in children can reduce preventable chronic disease in adulthood and sets children up for a healthy life.^{176 177 178}

176 The Australian Prevention Partnership Centre. 2022. Why invest in prevention in the first 2000 days? <https://preventioncentre.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/First-2000-days-Policy-Brief-FINAL.pdf>.

177 AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare). 2022. *Australia’s children*, AIHW, Australian Government.

178 Hurley KM; Yousafzai, AK; Lopez-Boo, F. 2016. Early Child Development and Nutrition: A Review of the Benefits and Challenges of Implementing Integrated Interventions, *Advances in Nutrition*, Volume 7, Issue 2, March.

The AIHW reports that childhood nutrition alone supports¹⁷⁹:

- Children’s physical and cognitive development.
- Helps to prevent overweight and obesity.
- Increases quality of life.
- Protects against infection.
- Protects against the development of chronic conditions in adulthood.

179 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2024. *Health of children*. Retrieved from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/health-of-children>.

Children's Ground's increased delivery of nutrition and preventive health promotion and support since the first evaluation period has seen engagement of children and families in health promotion doubling in some areas since the first evaluation period.

Active engagement of and support for child and family nutrition health promotion and practice also means that healthy routines, behaviours and choices are more likely to translate into home and community environments as well – with whole families learning how to improve nutrition together.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that, over six years, Children's Ground has had an important short-term impact on children's nutritional intake and overall health and wellbeing – which according to western evidence will likely lead to short-and longer-term health benefits through reduced preventable chronic illnesses over the life-course.

In addition to child health and wellbeing, Children's Ground significantly increased access and engagement in family health and wellbeing. Engagement of adults in health promotion, prevention and support more than doubled over the period in key areas of health and wellbeing.

The evaluation indicates that barriers to engagement in health are decreasing, health literacy and positive health behaviours are increasing and both children and adults are experiencing increased agency in their health.

In turn, this may alleviate (short-term) and mitigate (longer-term) preventable illness, early death and health burdens for infants, children and young people.

The evaluation also showed that engagement in social and emotional wellbeing promotion and support nearly doubled for children, and more than doubled for adults. Universal and targeted social and emotional wellbeing are embedded across the CG Approach to respond to intergenerational and persistent trauma, in line with national recommendations and strategies.

Recognising that most children engaging at Children's Ground have been exposed to complex trauma, trauma-informed practice in early childhood learning supported children in their cultural wellbeing, emotional regulation, safety, social and emotional literacy and healing. This has been evidenced as positively impacting children's self-regulation and social/emotional wellbeing and is critical for mitigating and preventing acute and chronic mental health issues, social and emotional stress and chronic illness associated with trauma through life.

Reported increased access to social/emotional wellbeing counselling, promotion and support for adults who are living with the impact of trauma has been evidenced as being important for healing and wellbeing, but also as supportive of improved care environments for children. This aligns with evidence of core care conditions for children and families in Moore, et al's (2024) recent paper 'Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice' – which outlines a range of health, social and environmental influences on parent/carer mental health, subsequently impacting children's mental health and wellbeing.¹⁸⁰

Taking health and wellbeing out of the clinic environment and delivering in and with communities where people live as well as embedding health into daily life and through first language have been instrumental in the dramatic increase in access and engagement.

180 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>.

While Children's Ground's principle of being place-based in and with community has not been able to be implemented as intended, in community delivery (either in community or on country), has been a cornerstone in the delivery of the health and wellbeing framework. This, coupled with delivery with and by local First Nations people, has enabled the centring of people, culture and language, evidenced as an empowering driver for engagement.

Evidence from this evaluation shows that Children's Ground's integrated service platform and targeted Family Health and Wellbeing framework is creating improved health access and equity and is resulting in improved health behaviours, literacy and prevention. It is also attending to broader social and cultural determinants including economic and structural determinants. Empowerment through governance, employment, community-based access and cultural safety have been key drivers for health engagement and achieving important progress in reducing health inequalities.



SUMMARY

This evaluation evidenced that the CG Approach impacted the learning, life and wellbeing of children and families and established the key conditions for achieving long-term change. Arguably, the most important driver for change is the centring of first language and culture in the design and delivery of the CG Approach, which led to a significant increase in engagement of children and families across all areas. This, in concert with the holistic design that focuses on conditions for children as well as families, is key to achieving impact.

Western and cultural evidence presented throughout this report clearly demonstrated that a strong cultural identity and connection to country is a protective factor for children and families. Western evidence is clear regarding the core care conditions that children and families need to flourish, but this must be combined with the cultural conditions and quality of delivery and practice.

Many current systems and services continue to deliver western-designed services, in contrast with global and national health and education plans and priorities that advocate for the centring of first culture in design and delivery.

First culture and language come from the land, the people, the knowledge and systems of practice.¹⁸¹ Centring this within service design and delivery cannot be led by services – it needs to be led by local First Nations people. Services can create the authorising environments to enable First Nations people to design, deliver and evaluate culturally centred services. This can only be achieved through the employment and governance of local First Nations people to ensure cultural safety and relevance nation by nation across Australia.



Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground achieved this and established a service system that centres First Nations world views, language and culture, alongside western service delivery that works alongside and complements, rather than disrupts cultural systems.

Education is a key social determinant for health. At the same time, health is a key determinant for education, as are family and community cultural, economic and social environments. By working across a range of key social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing, Children's Ground was able to empower and engage families in health, education, employment and systems of governance. In turn, this enabled families to support their children to engage in all aspects of child development, learning, health and wellbeing.

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that this is creating foundational conditions for children and families to thrive and flourish over the life-course.

¹⁸¹ Turner, M.K. & Children's Ground. 2023. *Apmerengentyele*. The M.K. Turner Report: A Plan for First Nations-led and designed Education Reform in Australia.

SECTION 5: SYSTEMS CHANGE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This evaluation marks six years of delivering Children's Ground's 25-year systems reform strategy to achieve sustained change and impact for children, families and communities over the course of a generation.

During this second three-year evaluation period, the CG Approach continued to be delivered as a 'growth model', with the financial resources for implementation of the full CG Approach not yet secured. This evaluation period was also impacted by COVID-19.

Between the first and second evaluation period, Children's Ground identified and applied important developmental learnings in relation to service delivery and system design. This resulted in important local adaptations to ensure responsiveness to each community's unique needs and circumstances. It also enabled growth and maturing in systems and processes at an organisational level.

While still early in the 25-year journey, this evaluation evidenced a strengthening of key foundational system elements that are important enablers for reforming the way in which services and supports are designed, delivered and evaluated with and by local First Nations people.

This final analysis responds to the remaining two long-term evaluation questions.

- **What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and any early progress towards impact?**
- **What contribution has been made towards broader systems reform?**

Responding to these evaluation questions analyses the systems impact of the CG Approach, bringing together process and impact findings under each of the systems reform areas: Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, Evaluation.

WHAT SYSTEM ENABLERS CONTRIBUTED TO IMPLEMENTATION EFFECTIVENESS AND ANY EARLY PROGRESS TOWARDS IMPACT?

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that all systems reform areas worked as a connected and collective suite of core components. Together, they provided the enabling and authorising environments that achieved the process effectiveness and impact of the CG Approach evidenced over the past six years.

Community governance – bottom up and locally-led

After six years of a 25-year journey, Children's Ground demonstrated that local community governance is central to systems impact. Empowerment has been a significant enabler for engagement, building confidence, self-worth and self-determination.

The empowerment described by First Nations staff and family members was striking and evident throughout the evaluation data. This evaluation found that the process of empowerment takes time and requires relationship development, cultural empowerment and creating safe environments.

The time and diverse spaces and opportunities Children's Ground provided to ensure many voices were heard and responded to in planning and decision-making (at a community and regional level) are key system design elements. An important feature is that the processes do not rush or force people to make decisions within a western timeframe. They enable cultural governance and decision-making protocols to occur within and outside of meetings and delivery – as determined by First Nations people.

Further, the significant role of Elders was again demonstrated as the critical authority required in the development and implementation of culturally responsive and safe delivery, and in children and families engaging in environments that reflected their cultures and languages.

With First Nations knowledge, practice and cultural systems centred in all elements of the CG Approach, Eldership and community governance was an enabler for the principles of 'Culturally safe' and 'Combining the old and new'.

As an authorising systemic element, community governance enabled employment, which enabled engagement across the CG Approach. It also enabled staff to work in line with the principle of being 'Child, family and community-led', because it provided the systemic environment and mandate for all staff to walk alongside and behind the leadership of First Nations people.

Western evidence-based system design elements required to close the gap in inequality and health and to redress complex disadvantage and inequity for First Nations people have been identified by multiple authors.^{182 183 184 185} In a review undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health within Murdoch Children's Research Institute (2011) the 'Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project' identified that:¹⁸⁶

- *To effectively engage and empower the community, new ways of working are required... The community must be involved in the design, production and evaluation of initiatives to ensure that their needs are identified and responded to.*
- *Robust, locally responsive governance structures that support collaborative partnerships and shared decision making between community, government and private enterprise need to be established.*

182 Moore, TG; Fry, R. 2011. Place-based Services: A Literature Review. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health.

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

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

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

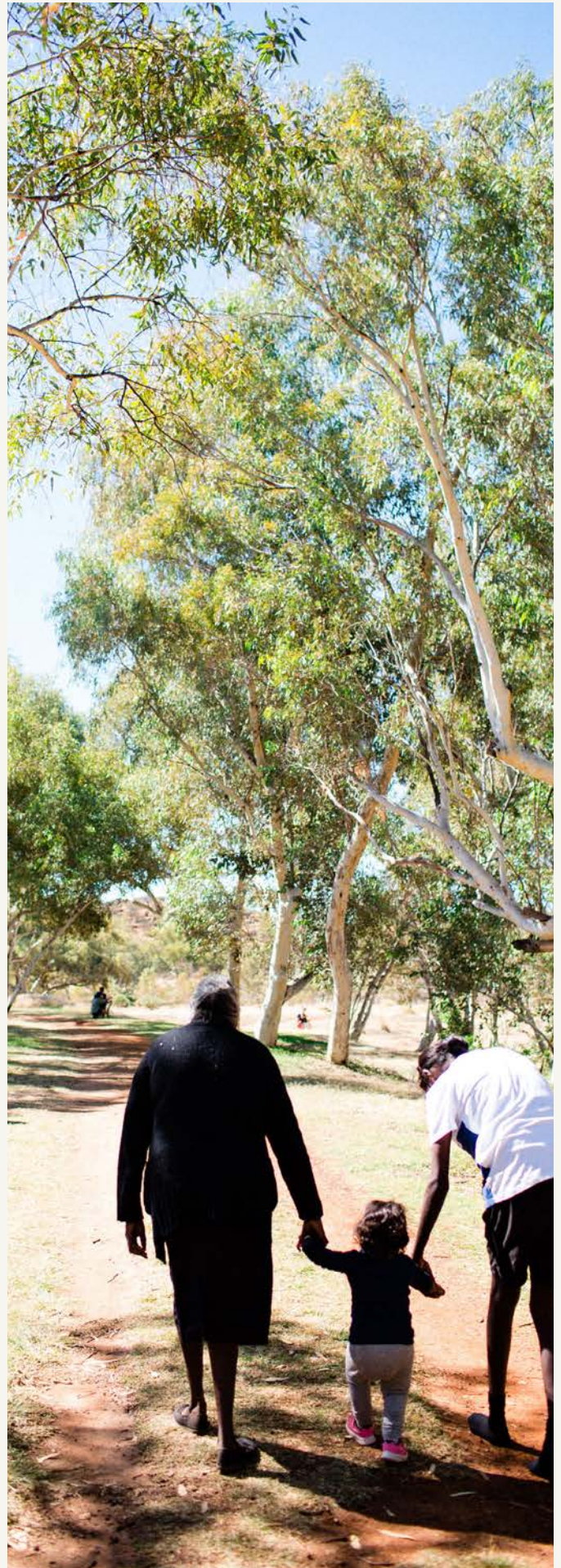
186 Centre for Community Child Health & The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. 2011. Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project.

- *Communities are well placed, and have a vested interest in reconfiguring their local service system to meet the needs of local children and families.*
- *Successful place-based interventions involve the engagement of communities in decisions of all kinds, the cultivation of community capacity, and the establishment of robust and collaborative governance arrangements.*

The First Nations-centred design of Children's Ground is leading practice. The key design elements in the CG Approach reflect systems of delivery that have evolved for over 65,000 years. These same elements are reflected in western evidence for leading system design. Children's Ground's progress within this systems reform area is in line with western evidence, with this evaluation demonstrating that Children's Ground is on track with achieving systemic community governance. However, it also found that there are areas where this can be strengthened and expanded as resources increase.

Within a context of extreme and complex intergenerational trauma, poverty, inequity and exclusion, Children's Ground evidenced increasing empowerment and control of First Nations people in systems and services.

Over the first and second evaluations, there is evidence that systems of community governance has been established and strengthened over six years.



Workforce – local First Nations workforce

One of the most powerful outcomes has been the development of a local First Nations workforce, where employment outcomes have been very poor in the past. The appetite for employment has been high, and the demands have outstripped capacity.

In a national context of poor employment outcomes for First Nations people in rural and remote areas, Children’s Ground’s evaluation evidence indicates that the CG Approach is successful in achieving employment outcomes.

Further, the evidence indicates that local employment is a key driver for engagement and impact across the CG Approach.

In design, this systems reform area seeks to build a local First Nations workforce over the long-term to reduce the history of a transient, largely non-First Nations workforce, which western evidence demonstrates can negatively impact child and family health and education outcomes for children and families.^{187 188 189}

Due to racism and exclusion from employment and education over generations, building a local First Nations workforce is expected to take a generation to fully realise – when the children engaging with Children’s Ground today can exit their educational experience with full agency in employment opportunities.

187 Jongen, C; McCalman, J; Campbell, S; *et al.* 2019. Working well: strategies to strengthen the workforce of the Indigenous primary healthcare sector. *BMC Health Serv Res* 19, 910. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4750-5>.

188 Zhao, Y; Russell, DJ; Guthridge, S; *et al.* 2019. Costs and effects of higher turnover of nurses and Aboriginal health practitioners and higher use of short-term nurses in remote Australian primary care services: an observational cohort study *BMJ Open*;9:e023906. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023906.

189 Hall, L. 2012. The ‘Come and Go’ Syndrome of Teachers in Remote Indigenous Schools: Listening to the Perspective of Indigenous Teachers about What Helps Teachers to Stay and What Makes Them Go. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*. 41. 10.1017/jie.2012.13.

After six years, two Children’s Ground evaluations have evidenced that the foundations for this long-term strategy are in place. It has also been evidenced that the short and medium-term design of this systems area has been achieved and is impactful in engaging people from communities in employment, many of whom have never or rarely experienced sustained paid work – subsequently impacting children’s home and family environments with family employment as their new norm.

A strong theme from this second evaluation has been the importance of culturally-based positions that can only be filled by local First Nations people with local cultural knowledge at various levels, from Elders, to cultural authorities and senior educators and Angangkere (traditional healers).

This is a critical and enabling design element within this system reform area clearly articulated by First Nations staff and family members throughout the report.

This systemic reform area was also an important enabler for the CG Approach to enact the principles of ‘Culturally safe’, ‘Assume and celebrate ability’, ‘Combine old and new ways’ and ‘Child, family and community-led’. This evaluation demonstrated that only through local First Nations employment can services and systems be culturally centred and safe.

Local First Nations employment was enabled by organisational processes, systems and policies. In turn, this was an important enabling condition for community governance, child and family engagement, and most importantly, embedding first language and culture across the integrated service platform.

While barriers to regular engagement in employment have reduced for many people (through daily pick-ups/drop-off and cultural leave policies), barriers do continue to exist for many people. Ongoing barriers relate to the persistent stress and trauma experienced in people’s lives which impacts the number of hours people are working and employment

continuity at times, which can in turn impact service quality. However, these risks are managed within the larger aim of achieving local First Nations employment.

The flexible, responsive and culturally safe design of Children's Ground's employment model supports people to maintain employment. This model includes wrap around services, as well as individualised supports during challenging times. In this respect, Children's Ground's integrated services systemic reform area is an enabler for building and maintaining a local First Nations workforce.

An Australian National University report identifies that income gaps are narrowing in urban areas but widening in more remote areas, particularly in very remote areas. Also included in the report is that over the past decade, poverty rates have risen in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities.¹⁹⁰ Evidence shows that, in 2019, more than half of the Indigenous population in very remote Australia was in income poverty.¹⁹¹ This demonstrates that Children's Ground is making significant progress in an area that often seems intractable within western-designed mainstream systems.



Integrated services – holistic, preventative and culturally centred

First Nations systems of knowledge and practice integrate every aspect of a person's identity, wellbeing, learning, cultural responsibilities, kinship (family and social connections) and surrounding influences on each of these. Children's Ground's integrated service platform was designed by First Nations people to reflect this, rather than western siloed services and delivery.

This evaluation demonstrates that, through First Nations centred design, governance and delivery, the authorising environments and conditions for integration have been put in place internally, and have strengthened over six years. The evaluation also shows that collaboration with local services also strengthened, with an increase in diversity of partnership and delivery types.

These achievements have been enabled by the systemic context and authorising environments of the CG Approach in which the integrated service system is delivered – notably the design and strategy of the systems reforms areas of employment, community governance and investment in outcomes, rather than outputs alone over the long-term.

¹⁹⁰ Markham, F; Biddle, N. 2016. Income, Poverty and Inequality; census paper 2, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU.

¹⁹¹ Sila, U; Dugain, V. 2019. Income Poverty of Households In Australia: Evidence From The Hilda Survey Economics Department Working Papers No. 1539, OECD.

In the review undertaken by the Centre for Community Child Health (2011) for Children's Ground, a range of evidence-based service system design elements were identified¹⁹²:

- *The service system needs to be integrated, able to respond to the individual and collective needs of families in a coordinated and holistic way.*
- *Better coordinated and more inclusive service systems are required to ensure that there is no 'wrong door' when families are in need of help. Effective partnerships between services will support an integrated approach.*
- *Services must be easy to access and the service system must be easy to navigate – there should be no barriers to families getting the support they need.*
- *Integrated, wrap-around community services are an emerging model of practice, both within Australia and abroad, which are beginning to demonstrate successful outcomes for children and families. Integrated models do not have to offer all services, but can act as brokers to establish partnerships with existing services.*
- *What is required are comprehensive place-based strategies that simultaneously address families' immediate needs for support (the foreground factors) and the broader conditions under which families are raising young children (the background factors).*

Evaluation evidence demonstrated that Children's Ground established and grew an integrated service system that is in-line with western leading practice in service delivery – one that has been evidenced throughout this report as meeting many needs of First Nations children, families and communities. This was enabled by community governance and local employment systems reform areas, which ensures local First Nations people are designing and delivering a culturally centred service platform.

¹⁹² Centre for Community Child Health & The Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. 2011. Review of the evidence base in relation to early childhood approaches to support children in highly disadvantaged communities for the Children's Ground Project.

For First Nations children and families who have had negative experiences with services and systems, such as racism, language and cultural exclusion and inequitable access,^{193 194 195} this can impact their trust and confidence in service systems.

The integrated service system design ensures staff have the flexibility and structure in delivery to spend time actively engaging and building relationships with children and families to understand and respond to the often multiple and complex needs of families.

Flexibility also enabled staff to operate from the perspective of equity, reducing service access barriers. This means staff can engage with children and families in ways and places when and where they are comfortable.

Working through an empowerment model that is designed to provide First Nations people with access to opportunities to build confidence and agency has led to genuine and trusted relationships between staff and families which has then enabled space for deeper and more extensive support.

Staff and local services identified challenges and areas for improvement with internal integration and external service collaborations. Achievements throughout this evaluation period were evidenced as having a positive impact for children, families, local services and Children's Ground. However, this systems reform area continues to require further resourcing and increased quality and integrity of integration.

¹⁹³ Markwick, A; Ansari, Z; Clinch, D; *et al.* 2019. Experiences of racism among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults living in the Australian state of Victoria: a cross-sectional population-based study. *BMC Public Health* 19, 309. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6614-7>.

¹⁹⁴ Kairuz, CA; Casanelia, LM; Bennett-Brook, K; *et al.* 2020. Impact of racism and discrimination on the physical and mental health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia: a protocol for a scoping review. *Syst Rev* 9, 223. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01480-w>.

¹⁹⁵ Cave, L; Shepherd, C; Cooper, MN; Zubrick, SR. 2018. Prevalence of Racial Discrimination in a Cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children. Brisbane, QLD: ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course.

Moore et al (2011) identified features of effective place-based interventions, which included:

*“Cultivation of community capacity; Adequate time; Attention to the characteristics that differentiate markedly disadvantaged from other areas... give priority consideration to education and training/retraining, work opportunities and placement, health promotion and treatment, parenting skills, developing local leadership capacities and attention to other specific needs of an area identified either by formal indicators or residents”.*¹⁹⁶

This evaluation evidenced that the design of Children’s Ground’s integrated service system has seen each of these implemented with families over the past six years, with some areas strengthening and growing between the two evaluation periods.

The authorising environments within Children’s Ground’s integrated system reform area have been central to the change and impact evidenced from 2017 to 2022 – coupled with local First Nations employment and community governance as critical enablers of progress within this systems reform area.



¹⁹⁶ Vinson (2009a) as seen in: Moore, TG; Fry, R. 2011. Place-based approaches to child and family services: A literature review. Parkville, Victoria: Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and The Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Community Child Health.

Collective investment – outcomes-based funding, over the long-term

Children’s Ground’s collective investment model is designed to achieve funding for whole communities over a 25-year period. Collective investment is the least visible of Children’s Ground systems reform areas, however, it is one of the most important enabling conditions for systems, service and practice change.

Collective investment enables multiple funding sources to come together as a single funding stream, which most importantly ensures First Nations communities hold the power in decision-making, ensuring community ownership and control of the CG Approach locally, including being an enabler for culturally centred design, delivery and evaluation.

Collective investment at scale to implement the full CG Approach has not been achieved. Despite the positive impact of the CG Approach, this lack of full investment has compromised reach, quality and impact. The lack of adequate funding has placed strain on resources and staff. It has impacted the capacity to be fully place-based and it has limited key areas of the CG Approach that support broader community level change. It also means that the integrity of the CG Approach is neither being met nor evidenced. The other risk this presents is that key design and service features that are necessary for sustainability and long-term change are not being implemented. Given the leading design and evidence of impact from the CG Approach, achieving full funding should be a priority both for current operations and for national systems policy and practice reform.

While the scale of funding required was not achieved, collective investment was achieved; this demonstrates innovation and leadership as a private:public investment model.

Throughout this evaluation period, philanthropic investment enabled culturally centred design and practice, local employment, flexibility and innovation. Government funding enabled capacity in key service areas. Together they complement each other to enable a responsive integrated service system.

Over six years, collective investment enabled continuity and growth of the CG Approach. This continuity has been demonstrated as critical to service-user engagement, experiences and care.¹⁹⁷ Like most organisations in remote areas, Children's Ground experiences challenges with staff turnover, particularly of non-First Nations staff. However, continuity for children and families is most often held by local First Nations staff, for whom Children's Ground has demonstrated high staff retention.

It was known and expected that it would take time to establish and build the key enabling foundations and drivers of child and family engagement. Children's Ground's systemic reform in collective investment has been a significant enabler for this to occur at the pace of each community.

Children's Ground's first and second evaluations demonstrated that taking the time for genuine child and family engagement is worth the time it takes. This requires a funding environment that is focused on outcomes, not outputs alone, and honours the priorities and needs of community.

¹⁹⁷ Khatri, R; Endalamaw, A; Erku, D; Wolka, E; Nigatu, F; Zewdie, A; Assefa, Y. 2023. Continuity and care coordination of primary health care: a scoping review. BMC Health Services Research 23:750 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-023-09718-8>.

In Australia, sector funding continues to be based on government and service priorities, rather than child, family and community centred. Siloed government departments with discrete program and policy areas continue to make it challenging to mobilise funds at scale for sustained place-based investment based on community priorities.

Collective investment has been a critical enabler that has allowed and set the foundation for long-term change over the 25-year CG Approach. However, Government has the capacity to provide the funding scale required for quality and integrity. Moving from Government top down short-term and siloed funding (which is the 'business as usual' of government¹⁹⁸) to multi-year government funding at scale for the CG Approach is critical to long term sustainability and impact.



¹⁹⁸ Productivity Commission. 2020. *Expenditure on Children in the Northern Territory*, Study Report, Canberra.

Evidence and evaluation – with First Nations leadership

Evidence and evaluation are key to achieving systems reform. The organisational strategy is to implement the CG Approach and impact in 3-5 regions to contribute to national practice and policy reform to achieve systems change more broadly.

Operationally, evidence and evaluation have ensured data-informed planning and delivery. It has also been an enabler for cross-cultural learning between First Nations and non-First Nations researchers, who together are learning new knowledge and skills through informal peer mentoring. This extended beyond the staff in the Research & Evaluation team to include First Nations Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme (Governance Committee) members. This enabled increased First Nations leadership in data collection and analysis for Children's Ground's triennial public evaluation processes and reports.

A key reform area of the CG Approach is ensuring First Nations people from communities are supported to have leadership roles in contributing practice evidence to national and international evidence-bases.

This is particularly important after a 2018 review and analysis by Williams found that only 8% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and social programs had been evaluated or were under evaluation (88 of 1082 programs).¹⁹⁹

199 Williams, M. 2018. Ngaa-bi-nya Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program evaluation framework. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia* 2018, Vol. 18(1) 6–20. SAGE.

Reform in this systems area aims to change the history of First Nations people being the subjects of research and evaluation in different forms since colonisation.

In many cases, this involved collecting data from people and taking it away to be analysed, with no direct benefit for the individuals or communities involved and no feedback on the outcomes. As stated by Luke et al (2022), this creates cultural bias in research and evaluation approaches:

*“Both research and evaluation as ‘evidence’ and evidence-based practice are conducted from within a cognitive frame, where human decision making is imperative to research methodology in how theories are placed, why methods are selected and how evidence is developed or reviewed.”*²⁰⁰

*As such, evidence methodologies are biased to the worldview of the humans who create them, with their cultural and social backgrounds, political views, values, experiences and social positions shaping their way of knowing, doing and being.”*²⁰⁰

This is supported by many authors in the field.²⁰¹
202 203 204

200 Luke, J; Verbunt, E; Zhang, A; et al. 2022. Questioning the ethics of evidence-based practice for Indigenous health and social settings in Australia. *BMJ Global Health* 7:e009167. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009167.

201 Wehipiwhana, N; McKegg, K. 2018. Values and culture in Evaluative thinking: insights from Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Dir Eval* 93–107.

202 Larkin, S. 2006. Evidence-Based policy making in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. *Aust Aboriginal Study*;2:17–26.

203 Kovach, M. 2005. *Indigenous methodologies: characteristics, conversations, and contexts*. 2nd ed. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

204 Ranchod, K; Guimarães, DS. 2021. Transcending global health dogma: an Indigenous perspective. *Lancet Glob Health* 9:e1357–8.

Walter, et al (2019) identify how mainstream Indigenous statistics focus almost exclusively on items related to Indigenous difference, disparity, disadvantage, dysfunction and deprivation.²⁰⁵ There is broad agreement on the need for data which meets First Nations needs and aspirations. These include, but are not limited to, data that reflects the embodied social, political, historical, and cultural realities of First Nations people's lives, as Indigenous peoples, and data that support Indigenous nation building agendas.^{206 207}

This is supported by national western and First Nations research institutes through the ethical standards of the National Health and Medical Research Council²⁰⁸ and in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.²⁰⁹ It also aligns with the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy developed by the Productivity Commission in 2020.

The inherent risks in culturally-biased research are highlighted in an analysis of a large multi-country Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, where Miller et al (2024) noted that there were “... notable disparities in on-track development for children from minority or Indigenous language-speaking households compared with those from dominant language-speaking households”.²¹⁰

They concluded that the disparity could in part be a result of mismeasurement due to the “...instrument's cross-linguistic limitations...” and that “...our results emphasise the degree to which marginalisation of minority and Indigenous languages impacts children's developmental health and represent a call for vigorous efforts to address this disparity”.²¹¹

The impact of culturally-biased evidence can be devastating for First Nations people. Policy, programs and government priorities are influenced by mainstream academic research. There is a need for First Nations centred research and evaluation. This underpins the way in which Children's Ground seeks to reform evaluation and evidence.

Over six years, Children's Ground enabled First Nations leadership in all evaluation and research. It has particularly ensured that data collection tools are developed with First Nations leaders, recognising that First Nations outcomes can only be genuinely measured using culturally safe, relevant and appropriate methods.

Children's Ground has an explicit culture of data collection, monitoring and evaluation embedded across the staff group. Efficiencies and standards in data collection can be improved and continue to be a work in progress. These efficiencies and improvements relate to the challenges of delivery on country, no connectivity in some locations, cultural and linguistic diversity, digital literacy and workplace practice in a context of high demand delivery. Nevertheless, there remains an embedded culture of data and evaluation across all staff.

205 Walter, M; Suina, M. 2019. Indigenous data, indigenous methodologies and indigenous data sovereignty. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 22(3).

206 Rainie, SC; Schultz, JL; Briggs, E; Riggs, P; Palmanteer-Holder, NL. 2017. Data as a strategic resource: Self-determination, governance, and the data challenge for Indigenous nations in the United States.

207 Walter, M; Suina, M. 2019. Indigenous data, indigenous methodologies and indigenous data sovereignty. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 22(3).

208 National Health and Medical Research Council. 2018. Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

209 AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. 2020. AITSIS.

210 Miller, AC; Flood, D; Tschida, S; Douglas, K; Rohloff, P. 2024. Assessing child development scores among minority and Indigenous language versus dominant language speakers: a cross-sectional analysis of national Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. www.thelancet.com/lancetgh. Vol 12. January 2024.

211 Miller, AC; Flood, D; Tschida, S; Douglas, K; Rohloff P. 2024. Assessing child development scores among minority and Indigenous language versus dominant language speakers: a cross-sectional analysis of national Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. www.thelancet.com/lancetgh. Vol 12. January 2024.

This evaluation has found that embedding evaluation as part of the core design of the CG Approach has been instrumental in empowering and developing local community skills, knowledge and literacy in evaluation and research. Building evaluation literacy is considered an important process and enabler of empowerment of First Nations people in western systems that collect their data and use it to inform policies and programs developed by non-First Nations people for First Nations people.

Children's Ground's strategy around evidence and evaluation systems reform goes beyond First Nations data sovereignty, extending to First Nations research, evaluation and data sovereignty. First Nations community governance and employment underpin sovereignty and evaluation integrity.

Children's Ground is demonstrating and evidencing First Nations led evaluation, where nationally, governments are not on-track.



As identified in the findings from the Productivity Commission's (2024) *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, governments are not enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led decision-making about data use, ongoing challenges remain regarding data access and often data continues to fail capturing cultural values and diversity and community contexts.²¹² Children's Ground aligns with the key recommendation from their report of recognising and supporting Indigenous data sovereignty.

Children's Ground recognises that Aboriginal organisations are not a surrogate for community voice. Achieving self-determination and valuing First Nations knowledge systems can only occur when approaches to and implementation of monitoring and evaluation are led by First Nations people in communities.^{213 214 215}



²¹² Productivity Commission. 2024. *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, Study report, volume 1, Canberra.

²¹³ Luke, J; Verbunt, E; Zhang, A; et al. 2022. Questioning the ethics of evidence-based practice for Indigenous health and social settings in Australia. *BMJ Global Health*. 7:e009167. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009167.

²¹⁴ Productivity Commission, Indigenous Evaluation Strategy: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy>.

²¹⁵ National Health and Medical Research Council. 2018. *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities: guidelines for researchers and stakeholders*. Canberra.

WHAT CONTRIBUTION HAS BEEN MADE TOWARDS BROADER SYSTEMS REFORM?

The CG Approach offers an alternative system - one that has the potential to achieve long-term change for children and families. As a culturally centred, community-led design it embeds all the features highlighted by Elders and western-based evidence and research for leading system design and practice.

Evidence throughout this evaluation report demonstrates that over six years, Children's Ground achieved positive changes and early impact with children and families. In particular, Children's Ground has evidenced systems reform and positive change and impact in areas where the Closing the Gap agenda and investment has made minimal progress in over a decade.

The evidence in this report not only speaks to the impact in Central Australian communities leading the CG Approach but provides evidence that can contribute to systems and practice change in other communities, relevant to governments at all levels.

The overarching finding of the Productivity Commission's 2024 'Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap' is that:

"...there has been no systematic approach to determining what strategies need to be implemented to disrupt business-as-usual of governments. 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".²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Productivity Commission. 2024. *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, Study report, volume 1, Canberra.

Key findings from the review of Closing the Gap systems reform states:²¹⁷

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

From these, the Productivity Commission outlined four recommendations for governments to improve systems, accountability and First Nations sovereignty. Their recommendations are:²¹⁸

- *Power needs to be shared.*
- *Indigenous Data Sovereignty needs to be recognised and supported.*
- *Mainstream systems and culture need to be fundamentally rethought.*
- *Stronger accountability is needed to drive behaviour change.*

The CG Approach presents a systems approach where each of these recommendations are enabled and being implemented and having an impact for children and families.

The CG Approach offers systems reform as a whole and within key areas of design. For example, culturally centred learning, community-based health promotion, First Nations employment structures, First Nations governance systems and systems of evaluation all offer innovation, policy and practice leadership.

²¹⁷ Productivity Commission. 2024. *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, Study report, volume 1, Canberra.
²¹⁸ *ibid*

In advocating for systems change, Children's Ground's First Nations leaders increased their presence in national forums through conference and gatherings, presenting evidence and practice while advocating for the rights of First Nations children and families to engage in education, health and employment that are culturally centred, in their language and delivered on their country and homelands. Their voice is contributing to changing the deficit-based narrative around First Nations people that is all too common across Australia and globally.

The CG Approach is scalable. It has been evidenced as effective and impactful in two diverse operational and geographical contexts – in Central Australia in Town Camps and homelands and in Kakadu West Arnhem as a remote centre. This report and the first (2017 to 2019) evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia reinforce the evaluation findings and evidence from Kakadu West Arnhem (2014 to 2017).

When the key principles underpinning the Approach are implemented with integrity, either at full scale as in Kakadu or through a growth model as in Central Australia, they enable empowerment, access and equity in services.

The CG Approach is a new system, designed with and led by First Nations people, that centres First Nations leading practice and is backed by an international evidence base. It is showing impact and the ability to establish the key foundations for long term change for children and families. It is a system of empowerment and strength that is creating the conditions for sustainable change. This can be achieved with the right levels of funding, to sustain the full CG Approach for a generation.



CONCLUSIONS

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.

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 – if only the government would come in and support it. 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 CONCLUSIONS

This second evaluation of the CG Approach in Central Australia shows that Children's Ground has continued to change the status quo for First Nations children and families.

The holistic changes evidenced for children and their families in education, health, employment, empowerment and role modelling has seen some children be born into a different normal to that of their parents and previous generations.

This evaluation has evidenced short-term change and impact for some children and families, as well as implementing an effective systems reform agenda with the service conditions and authorising environments necessary for sustained change over the medium and long-term.

With change and impact for children and families evidenced across many social and cultural determinants of wellbeing, western evidence suggests that this has a cumulative effect, building generational change over time, engagement-by-engagement and experience-by-experience.

As indicated by First Nations leaders, being patient, understanding the ongoing stressors on people and the need for a long-term generational change process are required for sustained impact over time.

This evaluation has evidenced the impact of culturally centred design led by local cultural Elders and authorities and local First Nations communities. Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that:

"Indigenous peoples have the right to their traditional medicines and to maintain their health practices... Have the right to access, without any

discrimination, all social and health services... [and] have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health".²¹⁹

Despite the Australian Government's ratification of the UNDRIP and the recommendations of the Productivity Commission, Children's Ground has been unable to secure Government funding that recognises and supports the full CG Approach as a First Nations design and system solutions.

Nevertheless, through collective investment, First Nations community leaders have led the implementation of the growth model for six years and achieved outstanding results in this time.

First Nations leaders are challenging the status quo which has denied the right of First Nations people to establish and access first cultural knowledge and practices as their system of choice in education, health, wellbeing and employment.

The cultural oppression and damage that has occurred due to western systems and punitive policies are being mitigated through their leadership of a new system.

This aligns with the global movement that recognises the value and importance of culture as a protective factor for First Nations people, which has been evidenced for decades. While Australia begins its own journey towards recognising culture as a protective factor, First Nations people leading the CG Approach have been delivering and evaluating this with their communities for six years.

²¹⁹ UN General Assembly, 2007. United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295.

The Productivity Commission's 2024 Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap highlighted enduring systems failures for First Nations communities in Australia:

"...governments are not adequately delivering on this commitment... progress in implementing the [Closing the Gap] Agreement's Priority Reforms has, for the most part, been weak and reflects tweaks to, or actions overlayed onto, business-as-usual approaches".²²⁰

Evaluation evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that Children's Ground is achieving and progressing systems reform through a 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 targets, particularly in the Northern Territory.

Progress, early impact and achievements have been evidenced as solid and necessary foundations for sustained change over time, with the enabling conditions and drivers of long-term change being effectively implemented.

While Children's Ground is still without adequate resourcing to implement the full comprehensive whole of community CG Approach, and 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 – with the evidence generated by local First Nations people from communities, who live the daily experience and outcomes they are working to change for their children and next generations cultural leaders.

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.



²²⁰ Productivity Commission, 2024. *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, Study report, volume 1, Canberra.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ARRERNTÉ LANGUAGE (translation from English to Arrernte is not always a direct translation)	
Akngerrapate	Elders
Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe	Children's Ground Central Australia
Ampe akweke	Child
Ampe-akweke mape	Children
Angangkere	Traditional healer
Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme	'Everyone being responsible'. This is the name of Children's Ground's First Nations Governance Committee in Central Australia.
Kwementyaye	Name used when an Arrernte person has died and their name can no longer be used out of respect.
Mparntwe	Alice Springs
Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye	The Arrernte Learning and Curriculum Framework is speaking to what and how educators are teaching and working towards achieving with children's learning and wellbeing.
Apmerenge-ntyale	Everything comes from the Land. Arrernte world view.
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS	
Children's Ground Approach	The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is the system being implemented and evaluated over 25 years. This includes: Ten practice principles (how we work); An integrated service platform (what we deliver); A foundation of systemic enabling conditions (community governance, First Nations workforce development, integrated service delivery, evaluation and collective investment).
Critical mass	At least 75% of the service population.
First Nations, Arrernte, Indigenous, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	Children's Ground works with a range of First Nations people from different language groups. • Arrernte is a language group and First Nation. Arrernte people initiated Children's Ground in Central Australia. Arrernte is used when it applies specifically to Arrernte people and content. • First Nations is used when referring to engagement in the Children's Ground Approach to reflect all participating nations. • Indigenous and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander is used when these are the terms used in any external research and evidence referenced.

Growth model	Gradual development of the Children's Ground Approach over time based on the resources available and with the intention to reach full scale delivery that can be sustained for 25 years.
Impact evaluation	Change and impact for children, families and communities is evaluated against the progress measures and long-term outcomes of the CG Approach.
Money story	Income/expenditure and financial situations – for individuals, families and Children's Ground in the region and as an organisation.
Ochre card	Northern Territory Working With Children Check.
Process evaluation	Process and implementation effectiveness is assessed and measured against the practice principles of the CG Approach.
Sorry business	A period of cultural protocols after a person has died.
Walk, Talk & Act (WTA) / Community Engagement and Planning (CEP)	Walk, Talk and Act (WTA) is used interchangeably with Community Engagement and Planning (CEP). This process occurs with communities to inform a formal decision by community and Children's Ground towards implementation of the full Children's Ground Approach.
Western	The term 'western' is used to broadly define systems of education, health, employment, governance as well as social norms, belief systems, traditions, etc that have their origins in Europe or are based on European culture.
ABBREVIATIONS	
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
AHKPI	Aboriginal Health Key Performance Indicator data
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
CG	Children's Ground
CG Approach	Children's Ground Approach
ESL	English as a second language
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
PHIDU	Public Health Information Development Unit
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
WTA	Walk, Talk & Act

APPENDIX 2: THE CG APPROACH — WHAT AND HOW SERVICES ARE DELIVERED

The following service delivery activities occurred throughout this evaluation period within each area of the integrated CG Approach service platform.

LEARNING & WELLBEING

- Daily delivery of intergenerational early learning with children and families, including twice-weekly Learning on Country.
- The Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye learning and curriculum framework that aligns with national Early Years Learning Framework – with local First Nations and western-trained educators – teaching children learning in their first language and English.
- Learning through play: self-regulation, perseverance, resilience, imagination, curiosity, confidence and safety.
- Integrated cultural and western health and wellbeing promotion in all learning delivery
- Intergenerational engagement in learning (alongside family).
- Individual child Learning & Wellbeing plans developed with families.

Targeted health promotion, prevention and early intervention support, delivered with individuals and whole families:

- Maternal and child health (pre, during and post pregnancy).
- Nutrition and food security.
- Physical health and wellbeing: health promotion and chronic illness management and support.
- Social and emotional wellbeing, with a focus on dealing with trauma.
- Environmental health and wellbeing, at a family, household and community level.
- First Nations health and wellbeing knowledge and practices (incl. traditional healing, bush medicines).
- Elder support.
- Access to clinical health and wellbeing (transport, service coordination, health literacy, social/emotional support).
- Family health and wellbeing planning.
- Planned and responsive public health and health promotion initiatives.

Universal health promotion integrated into early learning delivery:

- Nutrition program: Kitchen providing daily meals. Children and families engaging in preparing nutritious meals and nutrition literacy and education conversations.
- Healthy routines (teeth cleaning, face and hand washing, nose blowing).

FAMILY HEALTH & WELLBEING

- Western and first cultural health services focusing on access, prevention, promotion, literacy and agency.
- In-community delivery, taking health out of a clinical setting and into communities as part of everyday life, engaging with people where they are most comfortable and providing information in first language.

- Child health and wellbeing promotion.
- Cultural health practice and promotion (bush foods, bush medicines, Angangkere (traditional healer), baby/child smoking ceremonies).
- Health and wellbeing check-ins (checking ears, teeth, skin, cleaning sores).
- Social/emotional wellbeing (emotional literacy, emotional regulation and skills).
- Physical health promotion and activity (climbing, running, swimming).
- Creative arts, music, dancing, singing, etc.
- Targeted health sessions led by Children's Ground staff and other local health services.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & WELLBEING

A flexible approach to employment that reduces barriers to engagement and employment sustainability:

- Cultural and western based roles are remunerated equally for knowledge, skills and experience.
- Diverse employment contracts – casual, variable-hours, fixed-term to support staff with limited or no previous work experience to engage, build confidence and develop skills in the workforce as they are ready.
- Flexibility that ensures people are not forced to exit the workforce due to health, family stress or cultural obligations. Transport for workers.
- Cultural and ceremonial leave (extended but unpaid).

- Volunteering and engaging as participants as soft-entry points into employment.

Individualised employment support:

- Supporting employment documentation and compliance (i.e. tax file numbers and paperwork, birth certificates, bank accounts, working with children checks, police checks).
- Centrelink support.
- Financial literacy and budgeting support (savings, a portion of wages as food vouchers, payments to loans, bills, rent, etc).
- Individual work plans outlining interests, role expectations and how Children's Ground will assist them to develop their skills.
- For people who have never worked, extensive support to understand time sheets, work structure, compliance and policy.
- Access to social/emotional wellbeing counsellor on staff.
- Sorry business and funeral support (where possible).

Training and professional development:

- Western and cultural training and development.
- Professional development ranging from compliance (e.g. mandatory reporting) through to skills relevant to roles and further training (education, health, evaluation, etc.).
- Peer learning and mentoring - cultural and western trained experts who work together and mentor each other in their relevant skills.
- Personal development to assist with overall employability including gaining learners and probationary drivers permits and Arrernte and English literacy and numeracy.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & WELLBEING

Community empowerment - building on social, cultural and economic capital in communities

- Intergenerational community/family centres in each community were not achieved. One community established a place-based hub, the other three delivered integrated services in community without a permanent hub – creating environments of safety and wellbeing, community decision-making, learning, health, celebrations and local employment.
- Governance and decision-making – by family, community and region, including formal meeting structures, informal day to day discussions and First Nations only governance meetings.
- Community plans against the CG Approach, developed and reviewed twice a year for each community.
- Creating and supporting environments and standards of safety and inclusion within all Children's Ground delivery.
- Regular celebrations and events - opportunities for positive social connections and interactions.

CULTURAL & CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT & WELLBEING

- First Nations governance principles and protocols (from the land, Elders and cultural authorities).
- First Nations systems of knowledge and practice underpinning CG Approach at all levels.

- Strengthening and revitalisation of endangered languages.
- Cultural teaching, learning and knowledge transmission.
- Culturally based employment through positions based on cultural roles and responsibilities and expertise.
- First Nations standards embedded in policy, governance, practice, standards and evaluation.

INTEGRATED SERVICE DELIVERY - INTERNALLY AND EXTERNALLY

- Collaborations across Children's Ground teams (e.g. learning, health, enterprise, evaluation, community development) with a collective responsibility to an integrated services system that centres children and families and community.
- Collaboration with local services and organisations (including government, non-government and Aboriginal organisations working across areas of health, education, Centrelink, employment, housing, resources, arts, food security) that all delivered services or advocacy within the key five areas of the CG Approach.
- Collaboration with local interagency initiatives (e.g. Connected Beginnings and Youth services).



APPENDIX 3: EVALUATION FRAMEWORK AND PROGRESS INDICATORS

To create an environment with families and communities that realises their aspirations for the next generation of children - to be free from trauma and suffering, to enjoy equity and safety and be able to grow into adulthood happy and healthy, and with agency over their social, cultural, political and economic future.

	Children and young people				Family			Community		
Aspirations	Children are thriving-engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities.				Families feel confident about their children's wellbeing and future. They feel involved and empowered in their children's learning, wellbeing and development and their own ability to create environments of safety.			Communities enjoy economic, cultural and social strength and opportunity. Local Governance is strong and inclusive. People care for each other and provide a safe environment for every child.		
Headline indicator	Families are walking alongside their children									
High level outcomes	Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures	Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers	Children are healthy	Children are happy	Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development	Families are economically strong	Families are healthy and socially strong	The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural, social and economic wellbeing	The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity	The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity
Progress measures	Children have increased access to and engagement in First Cultural early years learning	Children have increased access to and engagement in high quality early years learning	Children have increased access to health promotion	Children have increased access to social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and literacy	No. of children have families participating alongside them in learning, health and development	Young people and adults have increased access to economic opportunities and support	Families have increased access to health promotion (incl. SEWB) Families have increased access health and social supports	First Nations governance is established, inclusive and active (# people & meetings) Community engages in cultural teaching and learning	Community has increased access to economic and employment opportunities	Community has access to cultural and physically safe intergenerational environments Community enjoys social and cultural events, activities and celebrations
Access & engagement	A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early years learning No. of children (3-5 years) engaging in early years learning (progressing towards Universal Access)		No. of children engaged in health promotion	No. of children engaged in SEWB	No. of families involved in their community alongside their children	No. of families (young people and adults) engaged in employment	No. of families (young people and adults) engaged in health, SEWB promotion and social environments	Community reports improvement in empowerment	Community engaged in economic opportunities	Community reports improved cultural and physical safety Prevalence of social stress
Outcome Indicators	% of children engaged first cultural learning	% of children engaged in primary school learning	A critical mass (75%) of children engaged with health promotion (how often and what)	A critical mass (75%) of children and young people engaged with SEWB (how often and what)	No. of children have families participating alongside them in learning, health and development	No. of families (young people and adults) engaged in economic opportunities (employment, enterprise, other)	No. of families (young people and adults) engaged in health and social & emotional promotion	% of community reporting strong First Nations governance % of community reporting strong cultural knowledge and wellbeing in their community	% of community members engaged in employment (with CG and other organisations)	Community has high quality intergenerational environments and resources for a range of cultural and social and economic activities where they live
YEAR 4-6	Increase frequency of child attendance in early learning (cultural and western) % of children engaging in early years learning at universal access levels (600 hours pa) % of children engaging in engaging in full time hours of primary school age learning		Decreased rates and types of morbidity for children and young people	Young people report improved SEWB	% of families reporting benefits from involvement in learning and health alongside their children	% of families (young people and adults) reporting benefits from economic opportunities	% of families (young people and adults) reporting increased engagement in health and social & emotional promotion	% of community reporting improvement in empowerment Governance is inclusive and active (No. of people involved and No. of meetings)	% of households in communities reporting benefits from economic opportunities	% of community reporting improved culturally and physically safe Prevalence of social stress experienced by community

Children and young people				
Outcome Indicators >7 YEARS	% of children achieving cultural knowledge appropriate for their age (assessed by cultural educators)	% of children at or above literacy and numeracy benchmarks appropriate for ESL speakers	Rates and types of morbidity for children (i.e. ears, anaemia, low birthweight, etc)	Children and young people reporting positive SEWB and identity
	% of children achieving standards for literacy & numeracy in first language	% of children developmentally vulnerable on one/two or more AEDC domains	% of children 'on-track' on the AEDC physical health and wellbeing domain	% of children 'on-track' on the AEDC emotional maturity and social competence domains
	% of young people reporting positive connection to their culture and self-identity	Rate of attainment of Yr. 12 or equiv. AQF Cert II or above	Reduced child hospital rates for preventable illnesses and injury	Decreased prevalence of suicide and mental health concerns for young people
Outcome Indicators 20-25+ YEARS	75% of children achieving benchmarks for first cultural learning	75% of children achieving national benchmarks in education (early learning to secondary)	<25% of children experiencing preventable illnesses	75% of children and young people experience positive mental health



Family

% of families teaching children their culture and knowledge systems

% of families and households with children where at least one adult is employed

Decreased rates and types of morbidity for adults

% of families who report setting goals and supporting their child's learning, health and wellbeing

% of families receiving unemployment benefits

Reduced rates and types of morbidity for adults – health and mental health

% of families reporting positive cultural connection for themselves and their family

100% of children have family engaged in their learning and wellbeing

75% of families experience secure independent income (free from Centrelink)

75% of families experience improved health, safety, and social wellbeing and inclusion

Community

% of community reporting strong cultural governance, knowledge and wellbeing in their community

Increased rates of employment for people aged 17 and above within the community and types of employment

Community reports quality cultural and social and economic activity where they live

% of community members engaged in local governance and decision making

Rates of Aboriginal people aged 18-24 years participating in education, training or employment

% of families confident in their children's safety

% of young people reporting feeling safe and engaged in their community

% of community members reporting local governance is empowering, based on customary governance and inclusive

% of community members reporting they are economically secure

% of community reporting safety, inclusiveness and diversity in the community

75% of community reports strong First Nations governance and empowerment

Unemployment rate at national standards

75% of community reporting safety, inclusiveness and diversity in the community



APPENDIX 4: CHILDREN'S GROUND AND INTERPLAY PARTNERSHIP

THE PARTNERSHIP WITH INTERPLAY

Children's Ground's 'Story of Change' survey was developed by First Nations leaders in 2019 using Interplay's existing suite of validated wellbeing measures and questions, as well as some additional questions added by Children's Ground's First Nations Governance Committee and staff.

The survey was designed as Children's Ground's 25-year baseline tool to capture data from adult family and community members about the current lived experience of First Nations people living within the communities leading Children's Ground. These are the current life circumstances that families want to see change for current and future generations of children.

The survey will be used as a cross-sectional tool, collecting the same data from new cohorts of adults at points in time to assess the extent to which the CG Approach is making progress towards the long-term family and community level outcomes.

ABOUT INTERPLAY

We believe in wellbeing for all people.

The Interplay Project is a social technology designed to solve complex challenges by working across cultures and world views. We coordinate research, evaluation and innovation projects grounded in grass-roots community development, collaboration and science.

Our Interplay team have been working together for over 10 years. Our team is led by Aboriginal people and other researchers with over 20 years experience working in Aboriginal communities. We value strengths based approaches and are passionate about building research and evaluation capabilities at the grassroots level in communities.

By creating space to bring program and policy funders, beneficiaries, and other partners together to shape the research and evaluation design, we support community organisations to drive and influence their own wellbeing framework to create a stronger impact.



RELEVANT LINKS:

- interplayproject.com
- equityhealthj.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-017-0563-5





APPENDIX 5: DATA DEFINITIONS, CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

DATA BY AGE AND AGE GROUPS

- When data is presented by year within the reporting period, each person's age is calculated as at 30 June of that year.
- When data is presented across all years of the reporting period, each person's age is calculated as at 30 June in the first year they engaged.

Throughout the report, data is presented by the following age groups:

- 0-8 years (early childhood) for learning and health data, with learning data split by 0-5 years and 6-8 years for formal learning data (Children's Ground does not yet provide primary school learning).
- 0-1 year, 2-3 years and 0-5 years for maternal and child health.
- 9-17 years represents young people.
- 18+ years represents adults.

Data is also presented throughout the report by other age groups for children and young people based on the intended focus age group for elements of the CG Approach.

COMMUNITY POPULATION MAPPING – DEFINING SERVICE POPULATIONS

The population mapping process started with each community during the 2016 Walk, Talk & Act Community Engagement and Planning phase and has continued to be developed over time. Building population data with communities requires regular cohort analysis processes to ensure that staff and community leaders are actively engaging with people across the community - building towards working with a critical mass of children and their families in

each community. This is the foundation from which regular and consistent attendance is built when full model resources become available.

Population mapping enables Children's Ground and communities to understand the progress with growth and reach year-on-year and across evaluation periods, with the aim of regularly maintaining population lists and building towards working with a critical mass of children and their families in each community over time.

There is some mobility due to a range of factors including housing, sorry business, infrastructure, health and other family and cultural circumstances. During the period, new people became part of the service population, and some moved outside Children's Ground's community service areas for varying lengths of time. This creates variations in service populations and is monitored and managed through population mapping with each community.

Children's Ground's intention is for communities to review and update this data every six months as part of their community governance, planning and reporting processes. As the capacity to achieve this grows, figures may vary as population data becomes more comprehensive.

INTERNAL ANONYMOUS SURVEY DATA

At times the denominator varies between questions for evaluation interviews and anonymous questionnaires (online or in-person). The diversity of roles across Children's Ground means that not all questions were relevant to all staff. Therefore, not all participants responded to all questions. The percentage of respondents is based on those who did respond to each question. When people responded with 'Not relevant', their data was excluded. When people responded with 'Don't know' their data was included.

LOCAL SERVICE ANONYMOUS SURVEY DATA

The diversity in service and partnership types and resource limitations made it challenging to capture the breadth of collective voices from all the organisations Children's Ground worked with - particularly capturing enough local services perspectives to enable quantitative data analysis in respect to each unique type and aim of partnerships and collaborations.

This data should be read with caution.

INTERNAL CHILD LEARNING & WELLBEING TOOL

Between the first and second evaluation periods Children's Ground undertook further development and refinement of the Child Learning & Wellbeing tool. As a result, learning progress data cannot be compared between evaluation periods. Going forward, Children's Ground will be using the same Child Learning & Wellbeing development tool and can present progress over time across evaluation periods.

EXTERNAL ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Given the small geographic areas in which Children's Ground works, external administrative data is not available by location. Therefore, external publicly available data has been presented to the best of our ability. There are variations in geography and years based on what was publicly accessible. There are understandable limitations of data for small geographic areas.

However, it raises a significant system issue in terms of easy access to data sets for community level monitoring and evaluation.

Furthermore, no culturally based data is routinely collected in external administrative systems. There is broad cultural, linguistic and geographic diversity across the First Nations of Australia. Cultural perspectives in relation to governance, health, education, economy and law vary markedly from western perspectives. In Australia, there has been very little research, evidence or data collected through First Nations perspectives to date.

Children's Ground will continue to seek access to relevant administrative data sets and to identify key gaps in public or government administrative data critical to understanding local community realities.



APPENDIX 6: 2020 TO 2022 CG APPROACH DELIVERY GROWTH TIMELINE

CGA integrated service platform	Full CG Approach	2019
Learning & Wellbeing	Four communities - Formal learning equivalent five days a week (on-country and centre-based in communities). - Informal extended hours learning (afterhours, weekends, school holidays). - Literacy/learning resource production. - Specialist educators in language, creative arts, music, physical education, multi-media, etc.	Three communities - Early learning 3-4 days per week per community. - Fourth community began mid-2019 – 1-3 days per week by the end of 2019. - No regular extended hours. - Learning resource development continued with first published books as small local enterprise. - Outside of cultural specialists and projects, no full engagement of specialist educators.
Family Health & Wellbeing	Health and Wellbeing framework fully delivered: - Health promotion - Social/Emotional wellbeing (SEWB). - Nutrition. - Cultural health. - Environmental health. - Maternal and child health. - Place-based, in-community.	- Key areas of the Health and Wellbeing framework established with resources for two communities stretched over four. - No resources or provision for Environmental Health. - Health & Wellbeing not place-based in communities.

2020	2021	2022
Four communities - Early learning ad hoc due to COVID. Approx 1-2 days per week per community with small groups only or family-led within their home or community. - Learning kits were developed and distributed to families in each community to enable family-led early learning (including data collection). - Learning resource development for enterprise on hold. - No regular extended hours or specialist educators outside of Arrernte language and cultural specialists.	Four communities - Early learning 3-4 days per week per community. - Began delivery of camps with a focus on early learning and as extended hours learning opportunities. - Learning resource development continued with more published books, app development and music as small enterprise. - No regular extended hours or specialist educators outside of Arrernte language and cultural specialists.	Four communities - Early learning 3-4 days per week per community. - Increased consistency in delivery of camps with a focus on early learning and as extended hours learning opportunities. - Learning resource development increased. - No regular extended hours or specialist educators outside of Arrernte language and cultural specialists.
- Staff pivoted to support COVID health promotion, planning prevention, responses and support. - As an essential service all CG staff worked with community and family groups (within COVID social distancing rules) to plan their needs for hygiene, cleaning, housing security, overcrowding, food security, income, signage, health promotion and COVID information, vaccinations, etc. - COVID related donations and funding enabled CG's extensive COVID response – this enabled a significantly resourced focus on environmental health.	- COVID support continued with focus on prevention and support during outbreaks and lockdowns. - Key areas of the Framework returned to being delivered (albeit with COVID restrictions in place). Continued with resources for two communities stretched over four. - Additional SEWB Counsellor through female workforce funding. - Short-term COVID funding enabled provision for Environmental Health. - Continued in-community delivery with ongoing challenges with being place-based.	- COVID support continued, with NT opening up increased support for people who had contracted COVID and in quarantine (e.g. food and other supplies). - Key areas of the Framework continue to be delivered, with resources for two communities stretched over four. - No resources or provision for Environmental Health. - Continued in-community delivery with ongoing challenges with being place-based.

CGA integrated service platform	Full CG Approach	2019
Community Development & Wellbeing	- Local First Nations governance for the region and each community. - Intergenerational hub of learning, wellbeing and safety in each community. - Community development. - Community celebrations of family, culture and safety.	- Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme regional governance. - Community governance established for each community. - Intergenerational place-based hubs not accessible or no not exist and not resourced. - CG Central Hub used for some learning and wellbeing. - Places of safety for learning and delivery created in each community (outside in areas identified by community). - Family nights and community celebrations. - WTA community engagement and planning in fourth community in mid-2019. - Ongoing work to secure tenure, water and power for Irrkerlantye.
Economic Development & Wellbeing	- Local community First Nations employment. - Enterprise opportunities and support. - Financial and consumer literacy. - Training and mentoring.	- Increased local employment. - Basic compliance and job-related training. - Limited resources for training and mentoring. - No financial and consumer literacy. - Maturing social enterprise.

2020	2021	2022
- CG Central Hub moved to a new permanent location. - Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme and community level governance continues and grows stronger. - No capacity for family nights and celebrations due to COVID restrictions. - Places of safety for learning and delivery continued to be achieved at CG's Hub. - Community development occurred through the focus on COVID. - Other community development priorities on hold.	- Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme continued to provide regional governance. - Community level governance strengthened with updated community plans in place for four communities. - Minimal resources and capacity for family nights and celebrations, including ongoing COVID restrictions. - Community development work with Irrkerlantye resumed to secure tenure and sustainable water and power. - Community development work with Mpweringke Anapipe focused on developing an intergenerational hub of learning and safety at Burt Creek homeland. - Places of safety continued within learning, wellbeing and cultural delivery.	- Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme continued to provide regional governance. - Community level governance continued to grow and strengthen. - Increased delivery of family nights and celebrations. - Community development work with Irrkerlantye and Mpweringke Anapipe continued. - Places of safety continued within learning and delivery.
- Increased local employment. - Compliance and job-related training (e.g. First Aid). - Introduced organisational compliance training. - Limited professional development opportunities. - No financial and consumer literacy. - Social enterprise, on hold due to COVID.	- Increased local employment. - Compliance and job-related training. - Increases training despite ongoing limited resources. - Secured resources for female workforce development, including employment support and SEWB counsellor. - No financial and consumer literacy. - Matured and expanded social enterprise, with an ongoing focus on learning resource development (books, app, music).	- Increased local employment. - Compliance and job-related training. - Increase training and professional development. - Embedded female workforce development. - No financial and consumer literacy. - Continued to strengthen and mature social enterprise.

CGA integrated service platform	Full CG Approach	2019
Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing	- Elders' leadership. - First Nations Governance. - Culture, law, language and practice is promoted and privileged in all Children's Ground activities.	- Elders' leadership. - Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme. - Culture, law, language and practice is prioritised through all areas of delivery. - Increased resources for language revitalisation. - On Country learning creates important focus for strengthening cultural life, knowledge, practice and law.
Service Coordination	- Planning and delivery partnerships with key services across internal integrated service platform and local service systems. - Service partnerships that enable seamless access for children and families to culturally safe services and environments.	- Increased staffing enabled increased capacity for coordination of services internally and externally. - Beginnings of seamless access to some local services through delivery partnerships.

2020	2021	2022
- Elders' leadership. - Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme. - First Nations leadership and governance at regional, community and family levels strengthened through CG's community empowerment approach to COVID planning, prevention and responses. - Many COVID resources developed in First Nations languages and English, including posters, videos, community key messages). - Culture, law, language and practice prioritised in all COVID support and activity. - Language revitalisation work on hold.	- Elders' leadership. - Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme strengthen in regular numbers and formalising of First Nations only governance meetings. - Culture, law, language and practice continues to be prioritised through all areas of delivery. - Ongoing work on learning resources in First Nations languages. - Increased resources for revitalisation of an additional language, at high risk (Akarre/Akityarre). - On Country learning creates important focus for strengthening cultural life, knowledge, practice and law.	- Elders' leadership. - Ingkerrekele Arntarnte-areme Culture, law, language and practice continues to be prioritised through all areas of delivery. - Ongoing work on language revitalisation and learning resources in First Nations languages. - Work to document and record Akarre/Akityarre language continued. - On Country learning creates important focus for strengthening cultural life, knowledge, practice and law.
- Extensive collaboration with local services at senior and practitioner levels with a focus on coordinated COVID responses. - Some service partnerships lost momentum due to staff turnover (in one or both organisations).	- Continued growth and increased resources/ staff enabled increased capacity for coordination of services internally and externally. - New service partnerships established and existing partnerships strengthened. - Some service partnerships lost momentum due to staff turnover. - Seamless access to some local services beginning to be achieved through delivery partnerships.	- Continued coordination. - New service partnerships established and existing partnerships strengthened. - Seamless access to some local services continued.

APPENDIX 7: CHILD LEARNING & WELLBEING TOOL

NTHAKENHE AMPE AKWEKE AKALTYE-IRREME (HOW OUR LITTLE CHILDREN LEARN)

TOOL DEVELOPMENT, PILOTING AND VALIDATION

Throughout the first evaluation period (2017 to 2019), Children's Ground's First Nations leaders worked with western-trained Research & Evaluation staff to develop a Child Learning & Wellbeing tool, aiming to collect and monitor children's cultural and western learning over time, based on the Arrernte-kenhe Angkentye learning and curriculum framework.

In 2022, Children's Ground received some research funding from AIATSIS²²¹ to refine and validate the Child Learning & Wellbeing developmental tool, applying both cultural and western statistical validation processes. Cultural validation was undertaken by First Nations Elders and cultural knowledge holders and statistical validation by Professor Sally Brinkman, University of South Australia.

Through this process, the tool was adapted, piloted and enhanced to meet both cultural and western validation requirements.

This evaluation is the first time child learning and wellbeing data has been collected using the tool. As a result, learning progress data cannot be compared between evaluation periods. Going forward, Children's Ground will be using the same Child Learning & Wellbeing development tool and can present progress over time across evaluation periods.

221 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

ABOUT THE TOOL

Titled: *Nthakenhe ampe akweke akaltye-irreme* (How our little children learn), the tool is a culturally safe and appropriate, strength-based summative child learning and wellbeing monitoring tool.

It can capture the cultural and western learning and wellbeing of First Nations children aged 3-7 years.

CHILD LEARNING & WELLBEING TOOL DOMAINS AND SUB- DOMAINS

The tool contains 83 questions which cover the following learning and wellbeing domains and sub-domains.

- Tyerentye-kenhe Iterrentye (Cultural knowledge and learning):
 - Country.
 - Family and Kinship.
 - Plants and animals.
 - Intergenerational learning.
 - Cultural ways of teaching and learning.
- Akaltye Irretyeke & Arne Mpwaretyeke (Learning, Exploring & Creative) - Approaches to learning.
- Arntarnte arelheme (Looking after self/safety).
- Utnenge & Ingkerrenyeke Anyenteke-irreme (Spirit & Social) - Social & Emotional.
- Angkentye (Language):
 - General verbal communication - in main Aboriginal language.
 - General verbal communication - in English.
- Iterrentye (Mind):
 - Formal literacy.
 - Numeracy and concepts (in any language).

Over time, each section of the tool will be enhanced to scale to children's learning progression. Cultural and statistical validation will continue to occur.

Child Learning & Wellbeing data collection is undertaken by First Nations and western educators together, taking an average of 15mins to complete for each child.

Children's Ground's Child Learning & Wellbeing tool was adapted by Children's Ground First Nations Leaders and Community Researchers from the 'Early Human Capability Index (eHCI)', developed by Sally Brinkman and colleagues.



APPENDIX 8: 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

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