Evaluation of Children's Ground in Garramilla (Darwin) 2020 to 2024

Baseline and early progress evaluation



children's ground

Acknowledgements

Children's Ground extends our deepest gratitude to the Elders, leaders, families and communities who hold and guide the long-term vision of Children's Ground. Your governance, leadership, daily work and participation are the foundation of Children's Ground. You are the heart of this vision, making it a reality for children now and in generations to come.

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We are grateful to the members of our national independent Research Advisory Group for their continued expert guidance and support. Your critical insights have shaped this evaluation, and your review of this report has been invaluable. We also acknowledge and thank your institutions for supporting your engagement with Children's Ground.

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You have stood with us in support of self-determination. With integrity, you have empowered rather than directed us – and for that, we are deeply thankful.

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Foreword

From the communities

When we think about the journey from 2020 to 2024, what stands out most is the participation of community and the communication between community and Children's Ground. The partnership has worked well because Children's Ground staff listen to community. But we need more participation from the wider community we need more Walk and Talk.

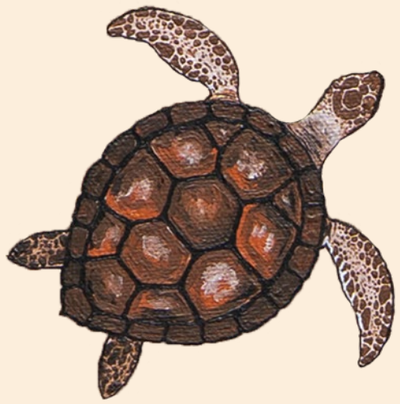
Over this time, we have seen more activities for children and families in the communities. We are proud of involving the early years kids and young people in learning, after-hours activities, bush trips, and bringing in girls' and boys' groups. The after-hours activities stand out because when children come home from school, they want to be on the phone or get bored or stress out their parents. Doing the afterhours activities take them out for about a couple of hours, give them something to do after school, they learn and grow and that is good for them, and also for the families. With Children's Ground, we have got our office spaces up and running, we got health support for community members, and the breakfast program. We are also proud of being community leaders and raising our voices for our communities. The strengths that have helped us continue this journey are community leadership and governance, and the partnership between community and Children's Ground.

We want our children to grow into strong young leaders. We don't want to see them going out and walking on the streets and getting into trouble. Because you see other families that kids get into trouble from 10yrs old. We don't want that for our kids. We want them to have good things in the community, including activities, games and places that keep them engaged and happy in the community. We don't want them doing drugs, alcohol and all other things. We want them to have a good education. Through bush trips, we work with children and teach them culture. We want children to hear from Elders and learn knowledge and culture so it can be passed on.

Strong communities are built by strong leaders and strong parents. It is important that communities lead decisions about their children and their future. The community should make the calls and the decisions about what is needed. Also, parents should know how to teach kids the proper way.

This report is part of a reflection process through which we learn, grow and make Children's Ground better. We do it by community and the information in this report is combined for the Darwin region for the public.

We want readers to understand the importance of recognising community leadership and recognising how communities are coming together to build a better future for our children.



From the Co-Chairs

We are pleased to release our first evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) in Darwin communities. This report represents the leadership of three communities in Darwin working together to change the future for the current and future generations of children.

The Darwin area is unique. There is a diversity of First Peoples from many communities living on Larrakia Country, with Darwin being the service centre for remote communities in the region. Historically, Darwin was one of the epicentres of the stolen generation. Massive overcrowding and people living on the fringes began during the assimilation policy era and continues today as many people travel in and out of Darwin to access health and other services.

In the Darwin communities leading Children's Ground, people have created a sense of belonging and home, even for people whose country is a long way away. Town Camps create a space for our people to live as Aboriginal people, away from scrutiny. They are also places that have been seriously neglected by successive governments and where children and families live with unacceptable pressures and lack of basic services. We cannot ignore the impact of assimilation for First Nations peoples. Colonisers divided people from country and from each other. Families and leaders want a different future for their children.

Each Town Camp leading the CG Approach is different, and our Approach respects each person's cultural background, knowledge and experience. We recognise that colonisation has interrupted cultural connection for many people, while culture remains strong and important to everyone. Children's Ground welcomes the whole community, wherever people come from, centring children and strengthening families and communities through culture as part of a holistic approach.

Focusing on our children always brings our communities together. The evaluation also shows that re-empowering cultural identity and re-strengthening cultural knowledge and life have also been main drivers of engagement in the CG Approach. In places like Darwin, rejuvenating language and culture can be hard. It takes time and this is one example of people taking agency in their lives. This is a long journey, but this first evaluation report shows that this journey has started.

As our fourth public evaluation of the CG Approach, this report builds on our evidence of what works and the strength of the Approach. We are creating access to services that has been denied to our people. Delivering a holistic approach in community in a way that is flexible and responds to the realities in each community is key. Most importantly Children's Ground is led by the people and the communities, and their voices are at the heart.

The foundation of the CG Approach is building relationships and spending the time to do that properly. Building trust. You can't make change if you don't have that trust. We see and hear from the people in Darwin. Leaders are committed. They are enthusiastic and hopeful and are seeing change. They are committed to 25 years and the future of their children.

Children's Ground is about the whole community. Not just the individual or one part of a person. You might start by planting a seed with a few children and their families but many more are being watered just because they are there - watching, learning, engaging.

We started small in Darwin. The evaluation also shows that we still have more engagement to do. It shows what has been working well and areas we need to continue focusing on and resourcing. We are also learning about scaling and delivering the CG Approach with communities that have different cultural, population and geographic contexts to other regions.

This evaluation shows that while there is still a long way to go, that communities are creating changes with their children and families. We can see from the evaluation findings and the voices of people the change and pride that people are experiencing. People feel good about themselves. The more people participate the more they grow. The more they have a voice and share their opinions and have the opportunity to action their ideas. And it is their solutions that work. The moment you start prescribing solutions and telling people what to do that is when people back off. It's got to be a community driven process all the way through. And that comes through in this evaluation report.

While we are confident about what is effective in breaking the cycle for a new generation of children, we are also aware that we are in the very early stages in Darwin. As a board we decided to establish operations in Darwin but we are a long way from the full Approach. Our communities need investment for the long term, they deserve excellence and access to key services that we know will change the future. We need to grow towards this so we can be doing the whole gamut, the whole integrated approach, from early childhood to young people, adults to Elders. Whole of life, whole of community. But funding doesn't yet permit us to do this. It's challenging. There is a need and there is a demand. This evaluation shows that if we invest in our communities, our culture and our people, that we can create change. We need to secure the funding to deepen this change for the long term.

Mr Tilmouth and Evelyn Schaber, Co-Chairs, Children's Ground Board

Veronica Doolan, Head of Cultural Integrity in Research & Evaluation



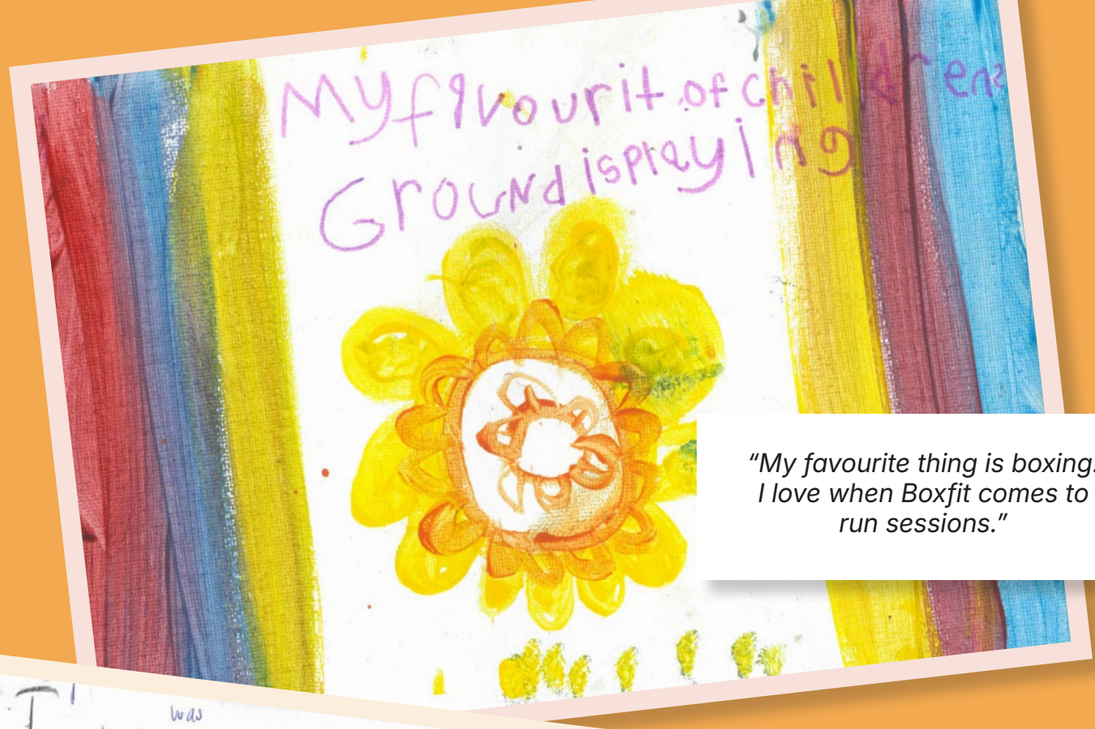




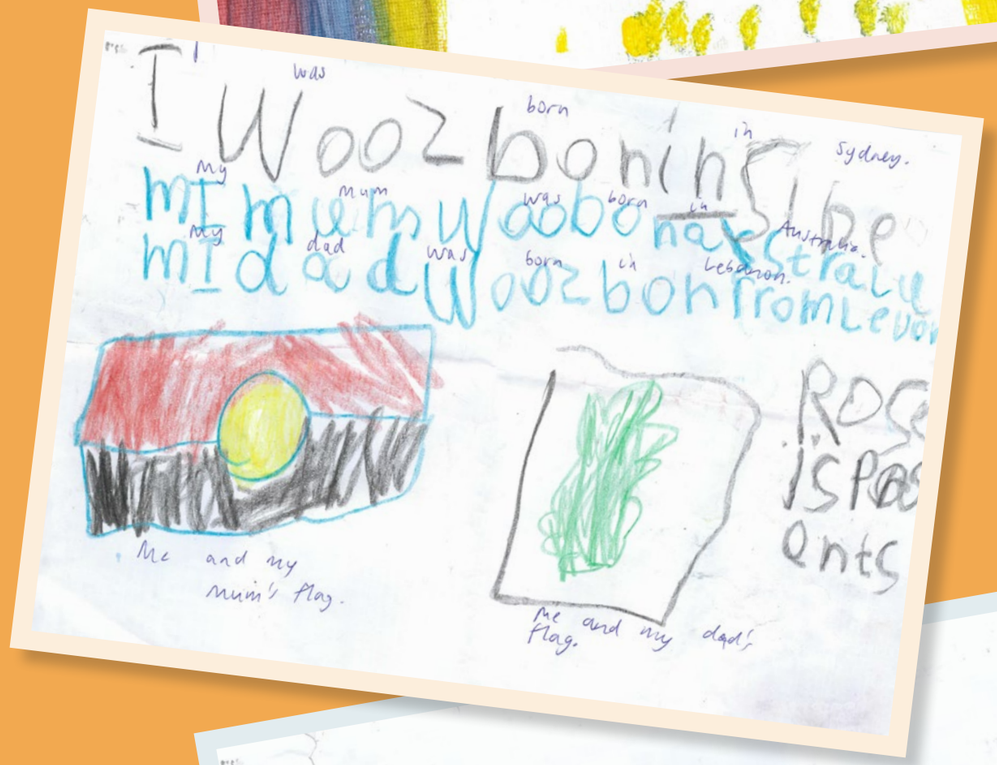
Voice of Children







"My favourite thing is boxing! I love when Boxfit comes to run sessions."





"My favourite part of Children's Ground is jumping castles and boxing."



Voice of Families

"We know what's best for our kids. And we – this is our home... Because we are the community. We're on the ground. We know what's happening in our home, with our families."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, put them all together. Not one person make the decision, it has to come from that [a family group from the community] mob. and it has to come from [another family group from the community], like that."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"And with Children's Ground, it is good to work with. I found out that I'm getting more stronger and being here for the kids."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Before I used to be sitting at home, doing nothing, like feeling bored, but now when Children's Ground came in I sort of like getting up and doing stuff."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"I like everything. I believe this is an organisation that can change the system. This is an organisation where I feel comfortable in. This is an organisation where they're not telling me what to do about my life and my kids."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"I have been watching and waiting to see if you [Children's Ground] were the right people. I have listened and learned about how Children's Ground works. I know about Children's Ground from my family too. Now I am handing my story over to you. I am putting my trust in you to achieve this."

40-45 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2021

"It makes me feel proud. Like we're all communicating together. There's no ifs or buts, there's no 'the boss', we all share the loads."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, and it's working. With Children's Ground coming in and encouraging us to get up and work and make the kids get up and go to school."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Well, I've seen now there's been happening, like, a lot of changes. I've got my two grandkids working for Children's Ground, doing after-hours... Now because of encouraging my daughter, now she's joining Children's Ground. So, that made me feel proud. At least I got my two grandchildren and now I've got my daughter up and running and working."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"I love kids, I love to create things for them to do, and have yarns with parents."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024





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Executive Summary

Children's Ground is a First Nations not-for-profit organisation, established to implement and evaluate a First Nations-designed service system, known as the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach). The CG Approach is being led by First Nations communities in three diverse regions across the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia, including Central Australia, West Arnhem and Darwin regions.

This report presents the first baseline and early progress evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) in three Garramilla (Darwin) communities, covering the first five years of operations from 2020 to 2024.

The report evaluates how the CG Approach was established and evolved during the period, beginning with Children's Ground's initial Walk, Talk & Act Community Engagement & Planning (CEP)[1] phase from 2020 to 2021, and transitioning into early-stage delivery of the CG Approach as a small-scale growth model[2] from 2022 to 2024.

It also reports on early-stage progress and impact in relation to how the CG Approach has been delivered to date (process evaluation) and early-stage impact against the 25-year cultural and western[3] Evaluation Frameworks (impact evaluation).

Finally, the contribution that Children's Ground's systems reform has made to early progress is also evaluated against evidence-based drivers of long-term sustained change for children, families and communities.

About the CG Approach

The CG Approach is a 25-year strategy that centres First Nations systems of governance and knowledge, combining these with Western leading practice and international evidence.

The CG Approach addresses key social, cultural and economic determinants of life-long opportunity and wellbeing through an integrated service system that 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-of-community approach tailored to the specific needs of each community.

Local First Nations leadership is the cornerstone of the CG Approach, with operations designed, delivered and evaluated by local communities.

1. A period of family and community engagement that occurs before beginning delivery of the CG Approach with any community.
2. An incremental delivery strategy that begins with implementing part of the CG Approach which evolves and expands over time as funding increases.
3. 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.

Evaluation frameworks, methods and analysis

The evaluation was undertaken in line with two longitudinal evaluation frameworks:

1. A First Nations community and cultural evaluation framework
2. A western evaluation framework

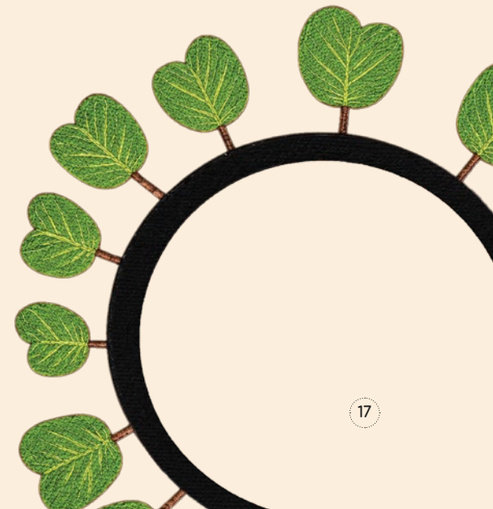
This evaluation applied a mixed methods Participatory Action Research approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to evaluate process effectiveness against Children's Ground's ten practice principles (How the CG Approach is delivered), and early change and impact against progress measures connected with the long-term outcomes for children, families and communities.

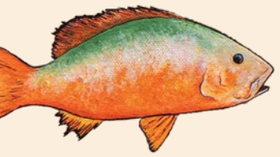
A Systems Analysis applied a causal pathways approach to evaluate the extent to which systems reform contributed to early change and impact for children and families, as well as evaluating if Children's Ground's Theory of Change for the Darwin region held true in practice. This is followed by a final analysis of any contribution Children's Ground has made towards broader systems reform.

Data collection that informed this evaluation included: Children's Ground administrative delivery and participation data; evaluation interviews and focus groups with First Nations staff and family members, western-trained staff and local service providers; Most Significant Change story collection; internal 'previous employment' survey.

The evaluation includes both cultural and western analysis, presented as key sections throughout the report.







Darwin communities and context

In Darwin, the CG Approach is led by First Nations leaders and families across three communities: Knuckey Lagoon, 15 Mile and Minmarama/Kulaluk[4].

Darwin presented a new context for delivery of the CG Approach in relation to geography, population patterns, cultural connectedness, historical policy, service delivery contexts and governance arrangements.

As an urban environment, Darwin is a highly colonised with many First Nations people experiencing significant disruptions to language, Country and culture through systemic racism embedded in policies and institutions. Population mobility in some areas saw whole family groups moving in and out of communities during the Walk, Talk & Act community engagement phase and during early-stage delivery.

These differences have shaped how the CG Approach was designed and experienced within and by each community, including an ongoing need for community engagement, while at the same time working to transition to early-stage delivery of the CG Approach.

Irrespective of the community context and history, the CG Approach recognises and ensures that lasting change is driven by communities themselves, grounded in empowerment and culture, and sustained over the long term.

Establishing and growing the CG Approach

Initial meetings with Darwin communities occurred in December 2019, followed by an invitation for Children's Ground to begin the WTA community engagement phase.

In January 2020, community-based First Nations staff were employed from each community and began delivering Children's Ground's initial Walk, Talk & Act Community Engagement & Planning phase with children and families, which continued into 2021.

While COVID-19 created an environment of uncertainty for many people, working with communities to provide COVID health promotion and support became part of the 'Act' within the WTA period because it was a key priority for each community.

From the outset, Children's Ground did not have the financial resources to deliver the full CG Approach in the Darwin communities. After the success of the CG Approach growth model in Central Australia, Darwin community leaders and the Children's Ground's Board agreed to progress a small-scale 'growth model' that could evolve and grow towards the full model as financial resources increased.

Therefore, in early 2022, the transition from WTA to early-stage CG Approach growth model delivery began, at the pace of each community, with ongoing community engagement remaining a high priority.

The growth model continued throughout the evaluation period with financial resources and delivery increasing modestly, however, not to the level required to deliver the full CG Approach. The initial focus of delivery was building inclusive community governance and equitable access and engagement as the foundation for the 25 years of delivery.



4. Note: Minmarama and Kulaluk are two distinct yet culturally connected and governed communities, and have chosen to identify as one community.

Summary of early-stage change and impact

Is the Children's Ground Approach having an impact for children and families?

Before the Children's Ground Approach, Darwin evidenced:

- Limited holistic community governance
- Limited engagement in early learning activities
- Limited engagement in health literacy and promotion
- Inconsistent, ad hoc or no access to existing local services
- Minimal opportunities to engage as family and community groups

Five years into the Children's Ground Approach →

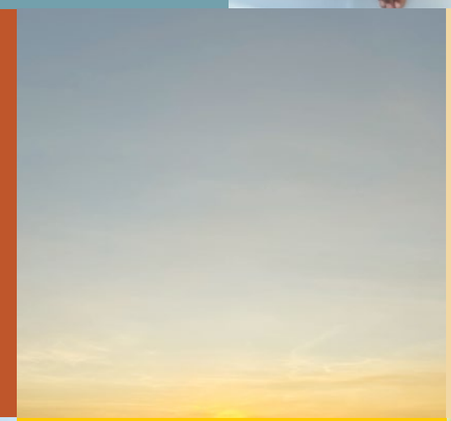
The CG Approach in Darwin has evidenced early-stage change and impact for children and families.

From 2020 to 2024, 940 children, young people and adults engaged with the CG Approach.



90
children (0-5 years) engaged in cultural and western early learning.

177
children and young people (0-17 years) engaged with after-hours learning.



24
community-based First Nations staff employed with CG.

33%
working in their first paid job.

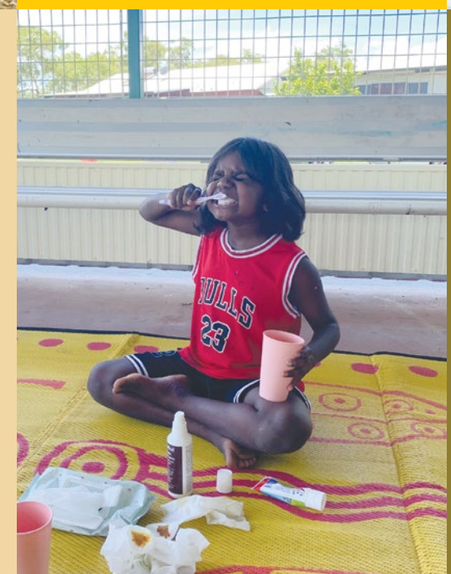


56
people have actively engaged in community governance and decision-making.



180
children (0-8 years) engaged in health promotion and support, including nutrition, healthy behaviours/routine, physical activity, etc. Including:

133
children (0-8 years) engaged with social/emotional wellbeing promotion.

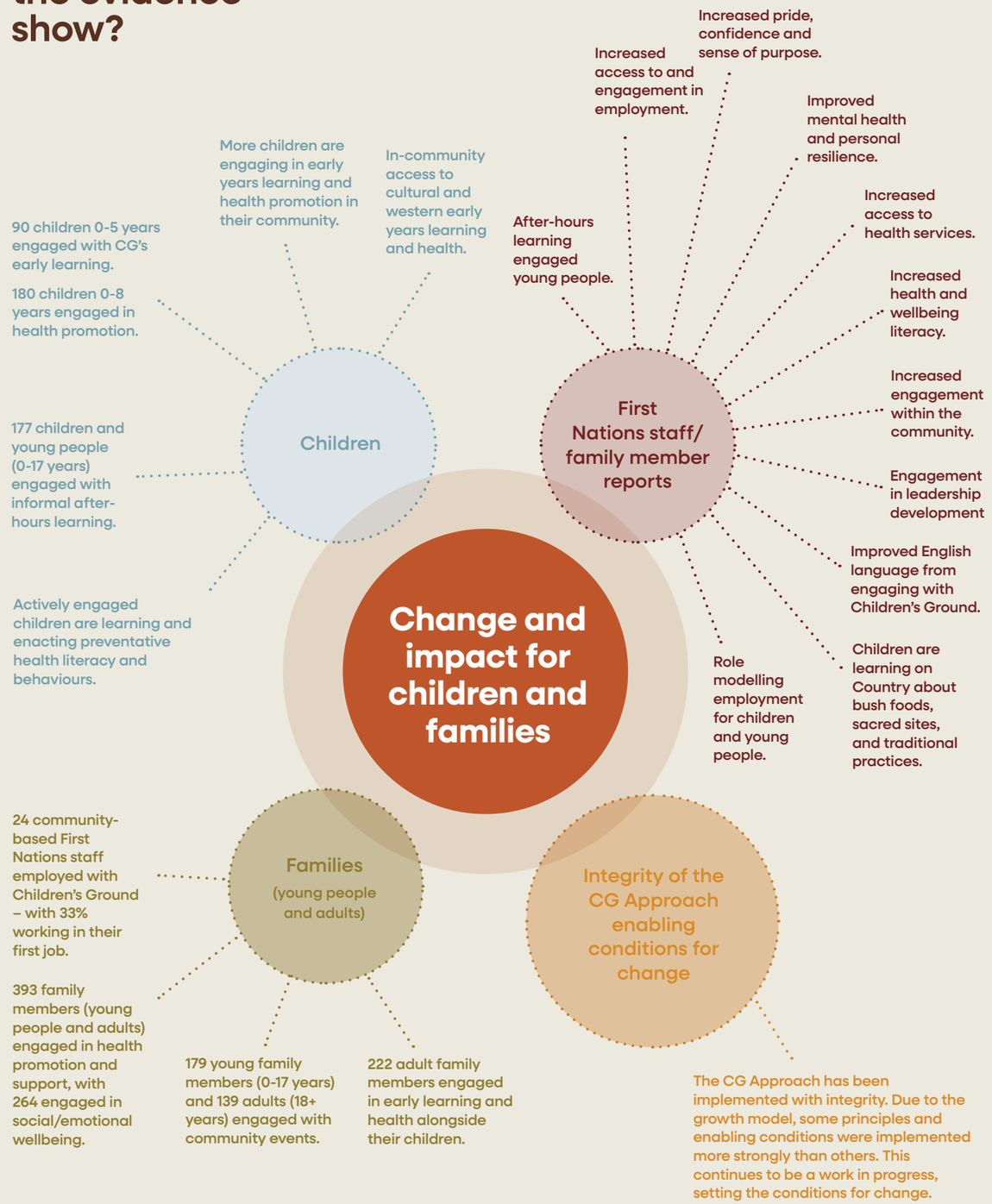


393
family members (young people and adults) engaged in health promotion and support. Including:

264
engaged in social/emotional wellbeing promotion.

146
supported to access clinical health and wellbeing services.

What does the evidence show?



Is the Children's Ground Approach being implemented effectively and as intended, in line with practice principles?

Delivery against the CG Approach's ten practice principles is progressing well in some areas, while others have been compromised by the growth model's limited resources.

↓

PROGRESS ACROSS CHILDREN'S GROUND'S TEN PRINCIPLES →

ON TRACK

PROGRESSING

NOT ON TRACK

	PROGRESS	SUMMARY OF PROGRESS	PROGRESS	SUMMARY OF PROGRESS
	ON TRACK	**Child, family & community-led:** Regional and community-level First Nations governance has been established and is reportedly following cultural governance protocols. Community governance has strengthened. Increasing engagement in all levels of governance remains a high priority, requiring adequate resourcing.	PROGRESSING	**In-community (place-based):** In-community delivery occurred in all three communities to a degree, but not yet to the extent intended. In two communities, place-based delivery was enabled by Children's Ground support to refurbish existing community centres.
	ON TRACK	**Start early:** Early learning and health promotion have been delivered regularly in communities, with young children actively engaged.	PROGRESSING	**Innovation – combining the old and new ways:** Cultural and western delivery has occurred in all three communities. Whilst this has been challenging at times in these highly colonised settings, staff and families remain strongly committed to it.
	ON TRACK	**Deliver the whole, not the bits:** Integrated CG Approach delivery has been established, with all service areas being implemented to the extent possible within the growth model resources. Effective collaborations with some local services have been established and strengthened over time – collectively contributing to reduced service access barriers for actively engaged children and families. However, both require strengthening.	PROGRESSING	**Expect and deliver the best:** Establishing and embedding cultural and western standards, processes and policies has progressed but has been impacted by the limitations of the growth model's resources. Ongoing resources and strengthening are required.
	ON TRACK	**Assume and celebrate ability:** Environments and opportunities for children, young people and adults to apply and develop their strengths and talents have been created effectively.	NOT ON TRACK	**Critical mass (75%):** In 2024 Children's Ground engaged with approximately 60% of children aged 0–8 years and 41% of adults (18+ years) across all Children's Ground communities.
	ON TRACK	**Culturally safe:** Community staff and family members reported experiencing Children's Ground as a culturally safe environment – an outcome significantly enabled by community-based employment and governance.	NOT ON TRACK	**Stay for the long-term:** The longevity of the CG Approach can only be assessed over time. However, the long-term commitment has been embraced as a key strength of the CG Approach, underpinning the community's confidence, trust and commitment to engage.

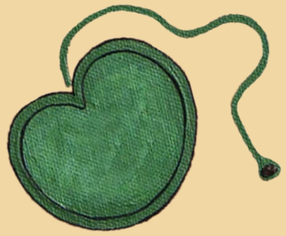
First Nations analysis

Figure 3

Children's Ground's First Nations Community Cultural Evaluation Framework







CIRCLES WITH THE CHILDREN'S GROUND LOGO: COMMUNITIES LEADING CHILDREN'S GROUND

LILY PADS: COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Being within Children's Ground allows us to be who we are. Everyone knows that Children's Ground is a safe place. Safety comes with everyone being responsible, support and encourage ownership, empowered.

Being in community, delivering in community has been on and off. Also, there has been a lot happening in the community, like we go through Sorry Business a lot.

Working with Children's Ground we feel pride, feeling good, the confidence, the trust, fun and happy.



LINE CONNECTING THE CIRCLES: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE COMMUNITIES

Every voice matters and we worry about everyone. We want to make sure that no one left behind, missing out. Everybody's connected, both within and between communities, and there is a desire to work together, share stories, and to learn of each other and make new connections through culture and community.

SHAPES ALONG THE LINE: ELDERS

Stolen Generation impacts identity, it was taken away, lost connection. Still trying to find connection. For some of us, all of our grandparents got taken from their Country. It's had an impact on everything. But that has empowered us to be stronger and go out looking for all of our connections too.



RIPPLES: OUR GOVERNANCE

Children's Ground is community-led. The leadership is in community. We do governance every day. Community makes every decision – being collective together. Children's Ground respects and follows community and cultural protocols. Local people know and they are the decision makers. It's not one voice, it's all voices, all voices matters.

We need more training and education to empower. We need more support with young people governance. We are employing young people, but we need more of it. We need more governance meetings.



FIRE: OUR STRENGTH AND HEALING

For many of us, Darwin is home but not our Country. And that's [one of] the cultural learning challenges.

But that has empowered us to be stronger and go out looking for all of our connections too. And we're in the process of that. And at the same time, we are trying to have our kids' identity strong by us connecting and trying to figure out and also at the same time trying to teach that to our kids. And it actually frames everything that we're doing... And why we're doing it.



FOOTPRINTS: LEARNING AND GROWING

Changes in kids' learning are there with Children's Ground. Children's Ground is helping children who only speak their first language and helping some kids who only speak English. We want them to walk in two worlds, be culturally strong and have the western world understanding.

Communities are all different. It's very hard to get a cultural teacher on the ground. Some of us can't speak our tongue fluently, so it's hard. We need more language. Cultural teaching happens at home, too. But we need more language cultural teachers from each language group. We need more camps. We need to know more about sacred sites and men's and women spaces. We need languages resources for different languages. We need language and cultural learning for young people and adults.

We want to do more walk and talk [family and community engagement]. Yeah, every house needs more kids involved, needs walk and talk consistently. Consistency with community is big.



THE ANIMALS AND PLANTS (INCLUDING THE SPIRIT FIRE IN THE CENTRE): OUR HEALTH STORY

Health is happening in every session. Bush trips support social and emotional wellbeing with old people telling stories. Kids learning about health, families are learning to do recipes too. That's going good. Young women group is happening.

We need more delivery. Health has not been enough, we need more. Children's Ground is our main support but also helping us to branch out by providing transport and access to other services.

We need more activities for families coming together, community coming together. Where we don't have a community centre [in one of the communities], that has an impact on health. We want a safe place to run all the programs.

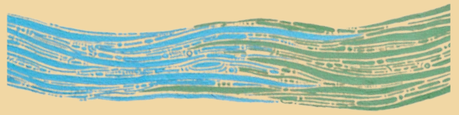


LEAVES OUTSIDE THE CIRCLES: MONEY STORY AND SUPPORT FROM EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

We need more funding. We need more money from the government. More money to tell our story or more money to run our programs. More money to keep Children's Ground around. The needs for different communities, it is different. Some of us would like more bush trips, other communities need a [community] hall or a fence.

We need more of that service networking. We need to get more out [in community] so it works out for us. These mob [local services], we want them to support us to do things.

For community, for services, government and stakeholders... No one comes back to us. There is no feedback from anyone. They just come in, take notes and take what we say and what we need in our community and they don't even come back and tell us. We are talking and talking, but we need action now.



THE WAVES: THE LONG JOURNEY

We need services and staff to come and stay for the long term, just stay with us, but they come and leave. So, because services come and go and Children's Ground staff come and go and that is creating a lot of frustration. What we need is more stability. We need more stable organisations. Children's Ground provides that. Children's Ground is always here. They're stable. People in the positions in Children's Ground, they can come and go but Children's Grounds is always here for us. They're here with us for 25 years.

Systems analysis

What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and progress towards short-, medium- and long-term impacts?

Children's Ground's five systems reform areas can be understood as the foundational mechanisms through which the conditions for child, family and community wellbeing are created.

A causal pathway analysis identified the following key findings for each reform area:

Governance (community-based, bottom-up and locally led): By establishing First Nations-led governance structures at both community and regional levels, Children's Ground shifted decision-making authority to local people. Whilst still in the early stages with more extensive engagement required, community-led governance has created conditions where actively engaged families have moved from being passive recipients of services to active decision-makers.

Workforce (local First Nations workforce): Community employment emerges as one of the strongest causal drivers of empowerment and engagement. Rather than viewing employment solely as an economic outcome, Children's Ground has evidenced employment as fundamental to changes for children and families, demonstrating clear ripple effects from community employment, including active engagement in community governance and leadership, and children seeing parents, siblings and grandparents employed, creating visible role models and different future aspirations.

Integrated services (holistic, preventative and culturally centred): Actively engaged children and families accessed multiple supports simultaneously, reducing service access barriers. Integrated delivery provided the conditions and pathways that encouraged and enabled families to engage in multiple service areas across the CG Approach. It also increased access to and engagement in other local services and programs.

Collective investment (outcomes-based funding, over the long-term): Reform in this area has been achieved to a degree, but not to the extent needed or intended. While the Children's Ground has not yet achieved the short or long-term funding required to deliver the full CG Approach in Darwin communities, the evaluation evidence demonstrates that short-term outcomes have been achieved despite operating through a constrained growth model with limited resources. This demonstrates that where adequate investment exists, the enabling conditions operate effectively, with resource limitations constraining scale rather than effectiveness.

Evidence (First Nations-led research and evaluation): Through community leadership in longitudinal evaluation, evidence has been generated in ways that respect First Nations knowledge systems and world views while demonstrating measurable short-term outcomes. This report itself demonstrates community leadership in evaluation through the cultural evaluation framework, participatory data analysis and community interpretation of findings.

The evaluation evidence supports that collectively these systems reforms are the primary mechanisms through which the CG Approach has contributed to early change and impact. Rather than acting as standalone initiatives, these reform areas have operated as an interconnected enabling system that reinforce one another and establish the foundations for intergenerational impact.

Darwin Theory of Change in practice

Children's Ground's Theory of Change (ToC) provides the long-term vision and anticipated pathways from implementation of the full CG Approach (as shown in Appendix 2, Figure 24). The Darwin ToC was developed through the lens of the small-scale growth model (as shown in Section 5, Figure 17).

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the Darwin scale ToC held true in practice. From the full CG Approach ToC, most outputs and short-term outcomes were experienced in all three communities to varying degrees. However, as evidenced throughout the report, these have not yet been experienced by a majority of children, young people and families in each community.

Findings from this evaluation show that the key foundations and pathways articulated in the ToC are being established and having an early, positive impact with actively engaged children and families.



What contribution was made towards broader systems reform?

This evaluation confirms findings in key areas across diverse locations that the CG Approach contributes to change and impact for children and families and can make a broader contribution to systems reform.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that when the key principles and enabling systemic conditions are implemented with integrity – either at full scale or through a growth model, and irrespective of the community, cultural, population and geographic context – that the CG Approach enables empowerment, increases access and equity, and increases engagement of children and families, many of whom have a history of experiencing significant barriers to engagement with mainstream services.

In contrast to decades of major inquiries and reviews, evaluations of the CG Approach have consistently evidenced change and impact with children and families in learning, health, employment, empowerment and cultural development.

The findings from the Darwin evaluation are consistent with evaluations of the CG Approach in all regions which collectively provide detailed process (implementation) and impact (outcome) learnings across a range Australian and Northern Territory government priorities.

This demonstrates the contribution Children's Ground has made, and could make to broader systems reform nationally.

Conclusions

First Nations analysis and conclusion

This evaluation shows how many families are participating, how many still need to engage, how our kids are growing, how we need to get more parents to bring their kids to the programs so that kids can have a good start, get ready for school. It also shows that we need more resources and more effort is needed to continue supporting our children and families.

This report shows that community voice, community leadership and teamwork between community and Children's Ground have been our main strengths. Employment has also been a big strength.

Looking back over the past five years, the biggest highlight has been seeing the outcomes for our children and families. Early years kids learning. Also seeing community come together. Gatherings, after-hours programs, Christmas parties and health days have brought people together and helped make the community stronger. We have also seen young people getting up and working, engaging, having employment. Support to build leadership has been life changing for some of us.

What gives us confidence for the future is seeing more young people involved and seeing them become role models for others in the community. But there is still more work to do.

Governments and services need to hear what communities want and need and learn how to work with communities. They need to come into the communities, work together with communities, get the communities involved in decision-making and learning how the system works.

Our responsibility is to create a stable community for future generations. We want our future generations to grow up healthy, learn from your community, and be strong leaders for the future. Children's Ground is supporting that, initiating Closing the Gap. That is what it is all about – listening to the community, writing up what they say, like this report. That is a start for Closing the Gap.



Western analysis and conclusion

Children's Ground is achieving community-led system transformation grounded in community empowerment and wellbeing. Early-stage findings evidence modest but significant changes that are foundational to long-term impact.

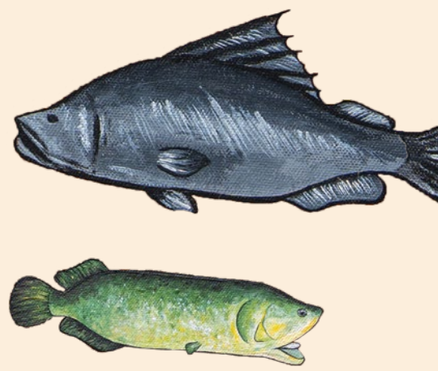
Causal links between the systems, processes and outcomes of the CG Approach in Darwin have been evidenced, demonstrating that Children's Ground's systems reforms are not simply implementation strategies but the conditions for change themselves.

Implementing the CG Approach in Darwin has been an opportunity for Children's Ground to evaluate and demonstrate the impact of the Approach in a more urban setting where the impacts of colonisation reflect those experienced in cities and regional centres across Australia. Coupled with the evidence from the CG Approach in Central Australia and West Arnhem, evidence emerging from Children's Ground's evaluations collectively can have broad-reaching impact for a diverse range of community contexts nationally.

This evaluation has evidenced that it is critical to invest resources and time in processes that create the space for genuine First Nations empowerment and control in decision-making. This provides environments for First Nations language, knowledge systems and practices to be strengthened and enacted, irrespective of the disruption from colonisation to connections to culture and Country.

Importantly, the evaluation shows that the limited resources of the growth model delivered with Darwin communities constrained the scale of implementation rather than the effectiveness of the model itself.

Overall, this evaluation demonstrates that Children's Ground is establishing the foundations required for sustained improvements in child development, family wellbeing, community empowerment, strong social, economic and cultural capital within communities and long-term systems transformation led by local First Nations communities.





Section One

Introduction

The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach)[5] is a 25-year strategy that aims to establish the foundations and pathways to create generational change over time. It is a First Nations-designed model that ensures First Nations governance, delivery and evaluation at the community and regional level. It is a systemic solution to achieving life-long wellbeing and end intergenerational inequity, exclusion and complex disadvantage and injustice.

It is a whole of community strategy, led by local communities who implement an integrated model of services across health, learning, culture, community, and economic development and wellbeing.

This report presents the first baseline and early progress evaluation of the CG Approach in Garramilla (Darwin) in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia. Children's Ground's 'Garramilla (Darwin) region' is led by the three c. communities: 1) Minmarama / Kulaluk (note, that Minmarama and Kulaluk are two distinct yet culturally connected and governed communities and have chosen to identify as one community, with Minmarama as the delivery hub and Kulaluk more involved with community governance), 2) Knuckey Lagoon and 3) 15 Mile (also known as Palmerston Indigenous Village or 'PIV'). Knuckey Lagoon and 15 Mile are two communities with diverse populations from a range of Nations.

Following initial community meetings in December 2019, an invitation was extended to Children's Ground to begin the Walk, Talk & Act (WTA), Community Engagement and Planning (CEP) phase[6], which extended from 2020 to 2021. Children's Ground began engagement with Larrakia traditional owners from Minmarama and Kulaluk. Local Larrakia community leaders then extended engagement and connection to Knuckey's Lagoon and then to 15 Mile. See Appendix 2 for information about Children's Ground's WTA CEP phase, which is a period of community engagement and approval/invitation that occurs before beginning delivery of the CG Approach with any area. From here on in, the WTA CEP is referred to simply as WTA.

The WTA period was followed by early-stage delivery of the CG Approach from approximately 2022 to 2024 for this evaluation period. Early-stage delivery was on a small-scale growth model (not the full CG Approach) due to significant funding constraints.

5. A glossary of terms and acronyms used throughout the report can be found in Appendix 1
6. Often referred to just as WTA, this is a period of family and community engagement that occurs before beginning delivery of the CG Approach with any community. It includes employment within each community to lead engagement family-by-family and/or house-by-house and to deliver early learning sessions and community events that can bring families together to discuss their aspirations and worries for their children, family and community, and their interest in beginning the CG Approach.

CG Approach growth-model

The growth model is an incremental delivery strategy that evolves and expands over time as funding increases. The full CG Approach is a model designed and costed for in-community delivery of a comprehensive and holistic suite of services and supports required to change the future for the current generation of children.

After the success of the CG Approach growth model in Central Australia, Darwin community leaders and Children's Ground's Board agreed to progress a small-scale 'growth model' in Darwin that could evolve and grow towards the full Approach as resources increased. See Box 1 for a description of the growth-model.

Section 3 provides more detail about establishing and growing the CG Approach in Darwin communities, including the community and regional context, and enabling and limiting influences.

Implementing the CG Approach in Darwin communities was an opportunity to further understand the adaptability and impact of the CG Approach in diverse contexts. Darwin presents a strategic opportunity for Children's Ground to implement, evaluate the CG Approach with communities in highly colonised contexts where First Nations language, connection to Country and cultural practices have been significantly disrupted and where each community context is different within the region.

A key principle of the CG Approach is that lasting change must be driven by communities themselves, grounded in empowerment and culture, and sustained over the long term. With a firm set of principles, a clear operating framework and understanding of the drivers of change, the CG Approach, in theory, is transferrable across diverse community contexts.

Over five years, the communities in Darwin have been designing, governing, delivering and evaluating the beginnings of the CG Approach with their communities.

This report covers the initial and ongoing WTA from 2020 to 2021 and early-stage delivery from 2022 to 2024. It establishes a baseline for longitudinal monitoring and evaluation, evaluating the processes and impact of early-stage delivery, all within the context of the growth model.

Key considerations for this evaluation include:

- The extended focus on WTA for small-scale growth delivery model, as opposed to the full CG Approach.
- The new geographical, political and urban colonial context of Darwin communities and region, which included a period of learning, adjusting and understanding how best to deliver the CG Approach as a regional operation (such learning remains ongoing).
- A different cultural context, with the three communities being distinct in language, population and history, and while they are connected, each has a unique context impacting design and delivery of the CG Approach by each community.
- Some evaluation progress indicators being adjusted due to the context of limited growth model delivery and to evaluate the CG Approach in a more urban social, economic and cultural environment.
- The impact of COVID-19 over the years of WTA and early-stage delivery.

During this evaluation period, resources and delivery increased slightly, with a significant gap still remaining between delivery and the full CG Approach. The impact of this is evident and noted throughout this report. The evaluation findings should be read within this context, recognising the importance of the full model in achieving sustainable change and impact.

This report is presented in six sections:

- SECTION 1: Introduction.
- SECTION 2: About this evaluation.
- SECTION 3: Children's Ground in Garramilla (Darwin).
- SECTION 4: Evaluation findings and analysis.
- SECTION 5: Systems analysis.
- CONCLUSIONS (First Nations and Western).

1.1 The Children's Ground Approach

The CG Approach places children in the centre, with families, services and supports revolving around each child. The CG Approach works and walks with children, their family and whole community over the course of a generation (25 years), from birth (and pre-birth) through to young adulthood when the children become the next generation of families in communities.

Working at the child, family and community level, the assumption behind the CG Approach is that, with the right conditions in place, whole communities can shift from complex and entrenched intergenerational disadvantage to achieve wellbeing and opportunity – culturally, economically, socially and politically.

This is consistent with western[7] evidence. As identified by Moore et al (2024):

"...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."[8]

The CG Approach draws from the expertise of First Nations leaders' knowledge and practice systems that have evolved for over 65,000 years It also draws from the decades of academic research and evidence 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.

Both western and cultural evidence demonstrates the importance of First Nations children (and people of all ages) having a strong cultural identity and engagement with their first language, cultural practices and Country to address and prevent intergenerational and complex disadvantage.[9] [10] [11]

Children's Ground's vision:

Children's Ground envisions a future where First Nations people across Australia exercise self-determination and experience social, cultural, political and economic justice.

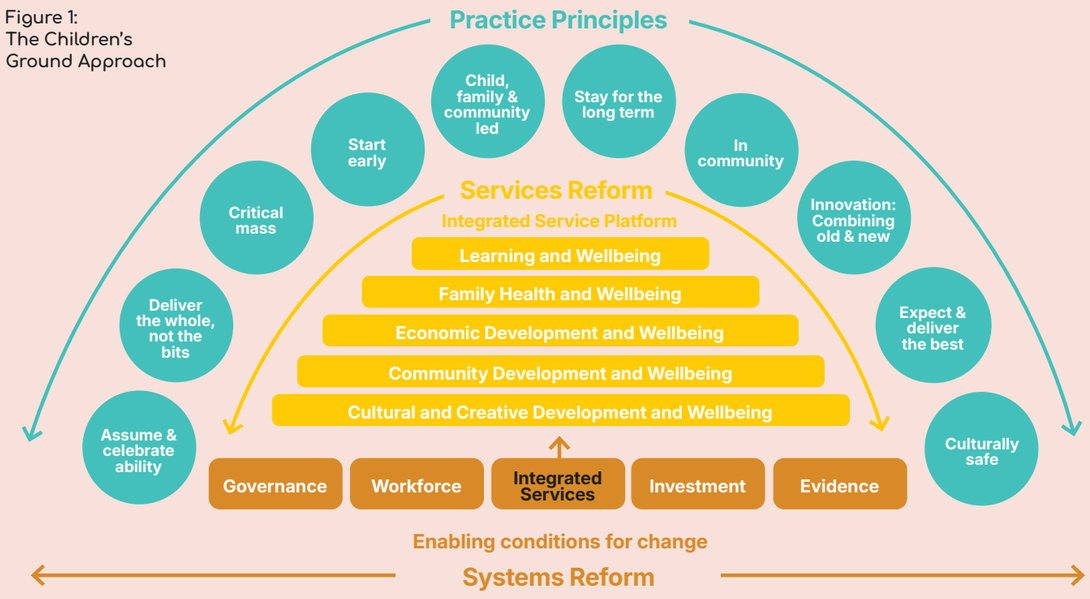
The next generation of children will grow up knowing and celebrating their culture and identity, with the freedom to choose their path and live with opportunity, peace and wellbeing.

Australians will recognise our shared history and celebrate the strength and richness of First Nations cultures.



7. See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a description of the term western
8. Moore, T. (2024). *Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice* (p. 11). Murdoch Children's Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2
9. Fatima, Y., Cleary, A., King, S., Solomon, S., McDaid, L., Hasan, M. M., Al Mamun, A., & Baxter, J. (2022). Cultural identity and social and emotional wellbeing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In J. Baxter, J. Lam, J. Povey, R. Lee, & S. R. Zubrick (Eds.), *Family dynamics over the life course: Foundations, turning points and outcomes* (pp. 57–70). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12224-8_4
10. Dinku, Y., Markham, F., Angelo, D., & Simpson, J. (2025). The connection between social and emotional wellbeing and Indigenous language use varies across language ecologies in Australia. *Social Science & Medicine*, 364, 117547. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117547
11. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Social determinants and Indigenous health*. https://www.aihw.gov.au

Figure 1:
The Children's Ground Approach



The CG Approach is implemented at three levels, as shown in Figure 1.

- Principles: How the CG Approach is implemented.
- Integrated Services platform: What services and supports are delivered.
- Systems reform: The enabling conditions for change.

In practice, in the full CG Approach, children and families in each community have access to all service areas of the CG Approach (yellow bars), delivered in line with Children's Ground's ten principles (blue circles). The systems reform areas (orange blocks) are key enabling and authorising environments required to achieve sustained change.

Principles

The principles of the CG Approach guide how the Approach is delivered (blue circles in Figure 1).

The CG Approach works at a whole-of-community level. It is designed to be place-based (**In-community**) and led by each community (**Child, family and community led**). Local governance and empowerment are fundamental with a focus on cultural knowledge, rights and safety (**Culturally safe**).

The CG Approach starts early with young children and walks with children and their families over the long-term (**Start early; Stay for the long-term**). With early life experience being critical to long-term life outcomes, these pathways and opportunities need to be available from birth (and pre-birth) through to adulthood. When a critical mass of children across a community has these opportunities, and they emerge into adulthood with education, health and economic pathways and a strong foundation in identity and culture, they will then lead the generational change for the future – a new norm can be established (**Critical mass – work with everyone**).

The holistic integrated service platform (yellow bars in Figure 1) responds to social and cultural determinants of wellbeing with each individual (**Deliver the whole, not the bits**), prioritising prevention and early intervention (**Start early**) and working with everyone in each community (**Critical mass**). Starting from a strengths-base (**Assume and celebrate ability**) recognises that every community is filled with talent that can be mobilised to create opportunities in communities.

Across the CG Approach, service delivery, governance and employment are culturally based, with both cultural and western knowledge systems and delivery (**Combining old and new; Culturally safe**) to bring the best of all worlds together for future generations.

The CG Approach embeds excellence, recognising that First Nations people deserve the best resources to experience high-quality delivery and opportunities (Expect and deliver the best).

By starting early, staying over the long-term, centring community leadership, working with the whole community (at least 75% of children and their family), investing and delivering in community, providing access to a fully integrated system of services, mobilising local talent, expecting quality, creating innovation between First Nations and western system of knowledge and practice and maintaining cultural safety, we aim to achieve transformational and generational change at a population level.



Integrated Services platform

The integrated service platform includes what services and supports are delivered within the CG Approach. Delivery in each area is guided by the principles. In practice, in the full CG Approach, each service area is delivered as follows:

Learning & Wellbeing

- Formal early years learning (adding primary and secondary learning as children and young people grow) delivered equivalent to 5 days per week, with cultural and western education curriculum, delivered on-Country and centre-based in communities.
- Extended-hours informal learning (after-hours, weekends, school holidays).
- Literacy/learning resource production.
- Specialist educators in language, creative arts, music, physical education, multi-media, etc.
- Health promotion integrated into all learning sessions.

Family Health & Wellbeing

- Health promotion and support delivered with whole families:
  - Targeted delivery with children, young people and adults, with individuals, households, family groups and whole communities.
  - Universal delivery integrated into all learning sessions.
- Health promotion and support includes:
  - Nutrition.
  - Child and maternal health (incl. sexual health with young people).
  - Cultural health and wellbeing.
    - Social/emotional wellbeing.
    - Environmental health.
    - Supported access to clinical health.
- Coordinated delivery in partnership with local services.

Community Development & Wellbeing

- Intergenerational hub of learning, wellbeing and safety in each community.
- Place-based delivery of learning, health, employment, governance, and community and cultural development.
- Weekly/fortnightly local First Nations governance, both for the region and each community.
- Daily governance with children and families through delivery.
- Community-led planning and reporting.
- Community celebrations of family, culture and safety.
- Community development activities and initiatives, based on community identified priorities.

Economic Development & Wellbeing

- Local First Nations employment. People from each community employed to lead, govern and deliver the CG Approach.
- Training and mentoring – both western and cultural – for professional and personal development.
- Financial and consumer literacy promotion and support.
- Enterprise opportunities and support.

Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing

- Elders' leadership.
- First Nations Governance.
- Culture, law, language and practice promoted, privileged and strengthened in Children's Ground delivery, systems and activities.

Local service coordination and partnerships:

All service areas across the CG Approach seek to establish partnerships with local organisations to enable seamless service/ program access and delivery for children and families.



Systems reform

The systems reform pillars are the enabling conditions for change (orange bars in Figure 1).

They provide the foundational environments for the CG Approach to be delivered in line with the principles and integrated service platform.

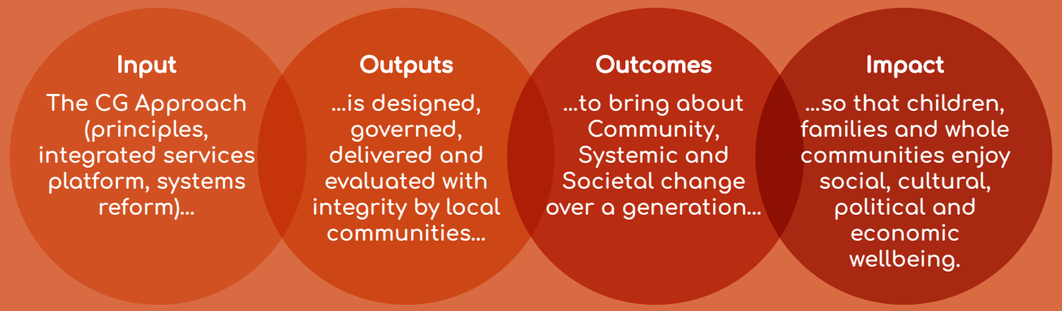
- **Governance:** Bottom-up, community-led design, governance, delivery and evaluation.
- **Workforce:** Local community-based employment from the outset, building towards a locally sustained First Nations workforce.
- **Integrated Services:** A holistic, integrated preventative service system that is culturally based, responsive and safe.
- **Collective investment:** Combines philanthropic, government, corporate and other funding sources at scale to achieve outcomes, not output alone. Enables genuine community decision-making to achieve flexibility, responsiveness, innovation and local control.
- **Evidence:** First Nations-led evaluation. Evaluating the CG Approach to achieve systems reform through evidence and leading practice, embedding First Nations data, research and evaluation sovereignty.

See Appendix 2 for further information about the CG Approach.

The CG Approach goes beyond service delivery in and with communities – as per Children's Ground's Theory of Change. The core strategy of Children's Ground is to implement the CG Approach over a generation to evidence and model systems reform that can inform national and jurisdictional policy and practice for the benefit of all First Nations people.

1.2 The CG Approach Theory of Change

Figure 2: Children's Ground's Theory of Change



Children's Ground's Theory of Change (ToC) articulates the logic underpinning how sustained, First Nations-led investment can create transformative change for children, families and communities over a generation. It recognises that intergenerational inequity and disempowerment are the result of long-term systemic exclusion and cannot be addressed through fragmented or short-term programs.

As outlined in Figure 2, the ToC articulates that when the CG Approach (principles, integrated system and systems reform) – as the key input – is delivered with integrity, ensuring the design, governance, implementation and evaluation of activities, service delivery and systems are led by communities (outputs), systemic change over the course of a generation can be achieved (outcome). This leads to children, families and communities enjoying social, cultural, political and economic wellbeing.

The ToC goes beyond the communities leading the CG Approach to broader national Community, Systems and Societal level change.

The daily whole-of-community-led work and longitudinal evaluation of the CG Approach are building the evidence base. Children's Ground's leadership and advocacy in systems reform is using this evidence to establish the case for national policy and practice reform. Alongside this, Children's Ground is also contributing to changing the public and political narrative, to centre the strength, ability and solutions of First Peoples. The intention is to contribute to a seismic shift from deficit and reactive responses, challenging negative stereotypes and racism and building respect for and visibility of First Nations people, cultures, histories and aspirations.

Children's Ground aims to work with enough communities and regions to build the evidence base for national systems change.

Collectively, these organisation-wide strategies relate to Children's Ground's core purpose. See Appendix 2 for further information and Children's Ground's detailed theory of change.

1.3 A new delivery context

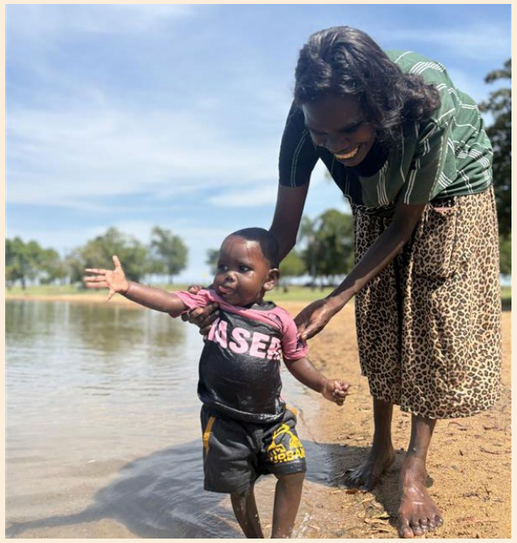
The Darwin communities and region were a new and different delivery environment for Children's Ground, which enabled community engagement and service delivery learnings within the CG Approach.

In Children's Ground's Central Australia and West Arnhem Land regions, the CG Approach has been implemented with communities that are linguistically and culturally related (same Nation or neighbouring Nations with shared cultural law and relationships). In contrast, Darwin communities are largely culturally and linguistically independent of each other, with some cultural connections.

As an urban environment, Darwin presents a new context for delivery of the CG Approach in relation to geography, population patterns, cultural and historical policy, service delivery contexts and governance arrangements.

In Darwin, fewer services and less funding are directed to Town Camp[12] community-based supports compared with Alice Springs, with an expectation that people will travel to access education, health and social services and economic opportunities, despite significant barriers. In response, the CG Approach prioritised community-based service delivery, coordination and employment in and with community, while also supporting equitable access to services outside communities. This reflects the intention of the CG Approach to be flexible and adaptable, enabling community-led, culturally safe delivery in diverse contexts, which is embedded in the design and ToC.

In Darwin communities, these differences have shaped how the CG Approach was designed and experienced within and by each community. The differences have also provided a deliberate opportunity to adapt the CG Approach within a diverse urban context.



In Darwin, the impacts of colonisation reflect those experienced in cities and regional centres across Australia, where most First Nations people live and where non-First Nations ways of doing and being dominate daily life. This has created a strategic opportunity for Children's Ground to evaluate and demonstrate the impact of the CG Approach in settings where First Nations languages, kinship systems, connection to Country and cultural practices have been significantly disrupted. The evidence emerging from evaluating the CG Approach in Darwin may have broader national implications.

These differences, along with the small-scale growth model, required a different evaluation lens – one that focused on evaluating experiences of individual communities to then aggregate findings, as compared with other regions where there was more consistency and shared experiences across the communities within the Children's Ground region.

12. See section 3.2 for a description of Town Camp communities

Section Two:
About this evaluation

This is the first evaluation of Children's Ground in Darwin, capturing baseline and early progress from 2020 to 2024 across three communities: Knuckey Lagoon, 15 Mile and Minmarama / Kulaluk.

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation has ethics approval from the Northern Territory Human Research Ethics Committee, facilitated by NT Health and the Menzies School of Health Research. This approval covers data collected for this report, excluding CG administrative data.

The evaluation method, data analysis and report were reviewed 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 report in Appendix 5.

2.1 Evaluation frameworks

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

Western 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 3. Progress indicators are attached to each outcome to measure change and impact over 25 years of the CG Approach. See Appendix 3 for the full western evaluation framework, including community aspirations, outcomes for children, families and communities and progress indicators against each outcome for year 1-3 of the CG Approach, which is consistent with the growth model delivery.

Figure 3: Children's Ground's Outcomes Evaluation Framework

Aspirations	Outcomes			
Children are thriving - engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities.	Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers.	Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures.	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 respects 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.

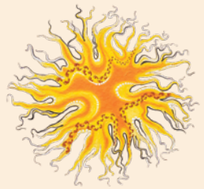
For the purposes of this evaluation, we are reporting on progress towards outcomes for Children and Families, recognising the longer-term Community outcomes are not expected to show impact at this early stage of operations.

First Nations Community Cultural Evaluation Framework

Children's Ground's First Nations Community Cultural evaluation framework, outlined in Figure 4, was developed by First Nations staff from each community. It represents evaluation priorities from a community and cultural perspective.

Figure 4: Children's Ground's First Nations Community Cultural Evaluation Framework





Fire: our strength and healing

Fire is our identity; it's a strong part of our culture. We get stronger by making a fire. Fire will keep our spirit burning. The fire is burning for our babies. The fire in the middle represents healing, culture, strength of the children and for us as well. Old people have taught us over many years that fire is very important because we love making fire. When we have fire, we cook on the fire, just to smell the smoke cleanses our body, it is good for our soul. We get stronger by those things. It is also healing, also we sit around the fire, we talk, it is very important, good healing on country. That is very important in our cultural way.



Footprints: learning and growing

The footprints getting bigger represents the 25-year approach for the little ones. The babies are growing older, into teenagers and then adults, and you want the best for them, so this is obviously our main thing, these are our babies. It starts fresh from our babies and as they are growing, because we do this 25-year journey with Children's Ground so we can see that our kids, from within this and the rest of our framework, they are walking and they're just getting stronger and stronger and bigger. It also shows that everyone takes different steps.



Lines connecting the circles: connections between the communities

The lines connecting the circles represents us communities connecting and coming together. Because at the end of the day, we are all one mob, we are connected through marriage, family and also through culture.

This is our safe space – within the boundaries of the framework. Outside the framework, square, I am not myself, walking on eggshells. Inside, I can be me.



Shapes along the line: our elders

The shapes along the line connecting the communities are our old people of all our mob guiding us in each direction, in all aspects of life. They also got to come from the outside to overlook everything we are doing in this painting. So these small shapes represent all our old people and our Elders because as we do things in the community, we always got to go back to our old people and our senior community leaders to make sure we do have permission, and we are doing it right and it's just how we go about things in our community.

We must always go back to our elders and old people. And our ancestors, like when we do things, when it comes to important things, we call out for our old people for help, for guidance, for everything.



Lily pads: community priorities

There are eight lily pads around the middle. Each lily pad represents things that are important for the communities:

1. Keeping our culture strong
2. Strong families and kinship
3. Strong spirit
4. Teaching kids both ways
5. Language
6. Songlines and stories
7. Caring for Country and respecting Country
8. Caring for our elders



Animals and plants (including the spirit fire in the centre): our health story

Health will always come under everything. It is all about the identity and strength and lily pads and eating all the animals and plants. Some of us eat freshwater tucker and some eat saltwater tucker. We want our people to be stronger. That's eating these natural bush tuckers and things like that. Staying strong and healthy.



Circles with the Children's Ground logo: communities leading Children's Ground

The circles in the corner are our communities. These are us who are doing this job.



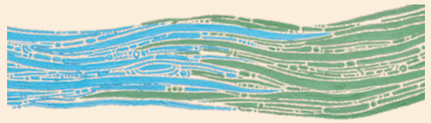
Ripples: our governance

These lines (representing the governance) echo out from each community because each community has a governance and then that represents the whole backdrop of the painting. Governance goes through the whole thing.

There is nothing without community governance, we can't do Children's Ground without it, and we have to go through everyone in community. Because governance always comes from the community first and we get the permission and the knowledge, and then we can go right towards everything else because we can't just go ahead and do whatever. We got to still go across the leaders and ask them can we do this or that and ask the community what they want. Because without the governance we can't fulfil anything, because we don't know what community wants and needs.

> That's pretty much what governance is, it's about the community wants and needs. And that's how our voice is getting out and then that's where we start with the babies and then we spread out to do our work. Our governance is very important, how we do things in community is that it always comes from community.

So that's a very important thing and we as workers are not only the community, so we must take it back to all our community and our Elders and make sure we have permissions and we're doing it right and delivering it right.



Waves: the long journey

The waves with its colour changing from green to blue represents the freshwater and saltwater people. It is also the 25-year journey that we are in with Children's Ground, we are here for the long journey. It is not a smooth journey, with the ups and downs. We are also limited based on funding and what comes and goes.

The waves represent Children's Ground, and this journey is never a smooth story. It's, up and down, up and down hard, just to pull in all the strings about how what we do at Children's Ground, from our sessions to just being in community, to our funders, from resources – that's what the wave represents.

> It's not a smooth journey. We are coming together and obviously it is bringing us all our four communities together as one for our journey and to keep our fire burning. That's our story.

We've come in waves. It's very seasonal and with our people too, we come and go as well. A lot of our families during dry season, they go back to homelands because they have access and there our kids get to be culturally strong, then they come back here in wet season and learn English with Children's Ground support in that space.

The waves represent how we come and go. We are seasonal people. Some people want to go back to Country because of certain things or that they want bush tucker or whatever. So, it comes in waves. It's very seasonal.



Leaves: money story and support from external organisations

The leaves outside of the circles are all the funders, the balandas (non-First Nations people), all the other services that are standing with us to make our community strong, to help us build this. The leaves represent all on the outside of our communities, all the branches that we're pulling in, getting money from funders, to resources, to just how we go about our children's programs and all our support on the outside to do what we can do.



Evaluation sovereignty and principles

Culturally safe and rigorous evaluation is best led by First Nations people, grounded in their languages, cultures and lived realities.[13] [14]

This aligns with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which affirms Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and control over their knowledge systems and development priorities.[15] [16]

Children's Ground has research and evaluation principles that seek to ensure First Nations communities own and control any research or evaluation that is undertaken about their children and families (see box 2). This sees community members and western-trained staff working together to minimise the risk of cultural bias[17] [18] and to continue exploring and strengthening local First Nations cultural approaches to research and evaluation.

At Children's Ground, local First Nations people lead and guide evaluation of their own solutions.

Through early stages of the Children's Ground Approach, building evaluation knowledge and experience with local First Nations communities is a priority. This evaluation process aligns with leading practice in First Nations-led evaluation, where non-First Nations evaluators support rather than lead.[19] [20]

For this first evaluation, Darwin community staff and leaders were involved in designing and governing it from the outset. Data collection was undertaken by a non-First Nations team member under the direction of First Nations leaders.

Box 2: Children's Ground research and evaluation principles

First Nations people have the right to 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, undertaking data collection, analysis, reporting and knowledge communication and translation).

Local context and knowledge must be privileged, developing relationships, respecting, understanding and following local cultural processes, timelines and expertise.

Creating knowledge together through combined First Nations and Western practice.

Knowledge into action and impact, ensuring what we learn is used to improve lives.

Only undertake evaluation that is of benefit to the participants and communities/groups.

13. Bailie, J., Matthews, V., Laycock, A. F., Conte, K., Feeney, L., & Bainbridge, R. (2024). Reflecting on the quality of a methodologically pluralist evaluation of a large-scale Indigenous health research collaboration in Australia. *BMJ Global Health*, 9(8), e014433. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2023-014433
14. Street, C., Kendall, B., McGhie, T., O'Flaherty, L., & Schaeffer, D. (2023). *A culturally adaptive approach to First Nations evaluation consulting*. Charles Darwin University.
15. United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*.
16. Gilbert, J., & Lennox, C. (2019). Towards new development paradigms: The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a tool to support self-determined development. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 23(5–6), 1045–1063.
17. Verbunt, E., Luke, J., Paradies, Y., Bamblett, M., Salamone, C., Jones, A., & Kelaher, M. (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
18. Drawson, A. S., Toombs, E., & Mushquash, C. J. (2017). Indigenous research methods: A systematic review. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal, 8*(2), Article 5. https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.5
19. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). (2020). *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*.
20. Singer, J., Bennett-Levy, J., & Rotumah, D. (2015). "You didn't just consult community, you involved us": Transformation of a 'top-down' Aboriginal mental health project into a 'bottom-up' community-driven process. *Australasian Psychiatry*, *23*(6), 614–619. https://doi.org/10.1177/1039856215614985

2.2 Method

Between April 2024 and July 2025, over 20 evaluation governance sessions were conducted with twelve community-based staff members. Attendance varied across sessions, with some staff participating in all the sessions and some attending only a few.

The initial sessions primarily focused on building evaluation capacity among participants.

Subsequent sessions included:

- Development of evaluation tools.
- Development of a community cultural evaluation framework.
- Analysing qualitative evaluation interview data, including Most Significant Change story review and prioritisation.
- Developing the First Nations analysis and conclusion sections throughout this report in line with the cultural framework.
- Reviewing and approving the final evaluation report.

Throughout the evaluation period, additional informal conversations between the non-First Nations evaluation staff and community staff also contributed to fostering culturally safe and grounded evaluation and data collection practices.

Children's Ground recognises that First Nations leadership in evaluation does not represent a single First Nations perspective and that over a longitudinal evaluation period, their experiences and perspectives will change.

This evaluation applied a Participatory Action Research approach, which emphasises research conducted *with* communities rather than *on* them, privileging participation, collective inquiry and action grounded in lived experience.[21] [22]

The evaluation team included two non-First Nations staff and more than ten First Nations community leaders (representatives) across the three communities. This approach respects, privileges and builds from the knowledge and experience of local First Nations people, providing agency over evaluation processes.

Evaluation questions

The evaluation of the CG Approach responds to three high level evaluation questions that cover the areas of process effectiveness, impact of the CG Approach and system reform.

The longitudinal evaluation questions are:

1. **Process Evaluation: Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended? In respect to:**
   - What was delivered across each area of the integrated service platform, within the context of the growth model and as compared with the full CG Approach?
   - How was the CG Approach delivered in line with the ten practice principles?
2. **Impact Evaluation: What progress occurred towards the long-term evaluation outcomes?**
3. **Systems Contribution Evaluation:**
   - What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and progress towards short-, medium- and long-term impacts (Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, Evaluation)?
   - What contribution was made towards broader systems reform?

21. Chevalier, J. M., & Buckles, D. J. (2013). *Participatory action research: Theory and methods for engaged inquiry.* Routledge.
22. Chilisa, B. (2019). *Indigenous research methodologies* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.



Data collection and analysis

This evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to assess how well the Approach was delivered within the ten practice principles (process evaluation) and measure of impact for child, families and communities against Children's Ground's cultural and western Evaluation Frameworks (impact evaluation).

Data collection

Throughout the WTA and early-stage delivery, baseline data was constructed over time. The CG Approach prioritises relationship-building and community participation as a foundation for engagement and planning. Consistent with this approach, baseline information was collected progressively as trust, relationships and community participation strengthened within communities, rather than through a single pre-implementation data collection process.

From 2020, quantitative data was captured daily by all staff through Children's Ground's administrative web-based data system. This tracked participation, engagement and service delivery across the CG Approach. Qualitative data was collected over a one-year period, from July 2024 to July 2025. Table 1 outlines details of data sources, collection methods and participant representation.





Table 1: Data sources and participant representation

Baseline data

The following information was collected with each community about their experiences before Children's Ground started to inform baseline data for the longitudinal evaluation: Service access and engagement (education, health, etc) experiences and patterns (within and outside of community), community population information (numbers and ages of families), employment within communities, existing community governance structures and the focus and strength of these, cultural teaching and learning, and community aspirations, worries, needs and goals, etc.

Desktop analysis

The following documents were reviewed to inform context and process evaluation findings: Children's Ground Walk, Talk and Act documents, Community Plans from all Darwin communities and staff quarterly reports.

Internal administrative (and other) data

Children's Ground's internal administrative data system collected participation and activity data for 940 community members who engaged with the CG Approach from 2020 to 2024. Data was collected daily by delivery staff (First Nations and non-First Nations). Employment and financial data were sourced from organisational Human Resources and financial systems.

Interviews and focus groups

Evaluation interviews were semi-structured and guided by a tool designed with First Nations community leaders. The tool collected both qualitative and quantitative data about the delivery and impact of the CG Approach. Purposive sampling ensured representation across each community, targeting First Nations staff and family/ community members, delivery staff and management and local services Children's Ground has worked with over the period. Face-to-face interviews and focus groups were undertaken with:

- **Community members and staff**: 19 interviews (9 community-based staff, 10 other community members) – 100% response rate.
- **Western-trained staff**: 12 interviews (4 First Nations, 8 non-First Nations) – 100% response rate.
- **Stakeholders**: 9 interviews and 2 focus groups with 19 local service providers in total. This included 9 individuals interviewed – 90% response rate; and 10 individuals participated in focus groups from a range of services involved with community service networks.

Stories of change

During the one-on-one interviews, all participants were asked about what the most significant changes have been since their engagement with Children's Ground. Responses to that question with additional context from the rest of their interview were used to create 29 individual stories of change.

Internal survey about previous employment

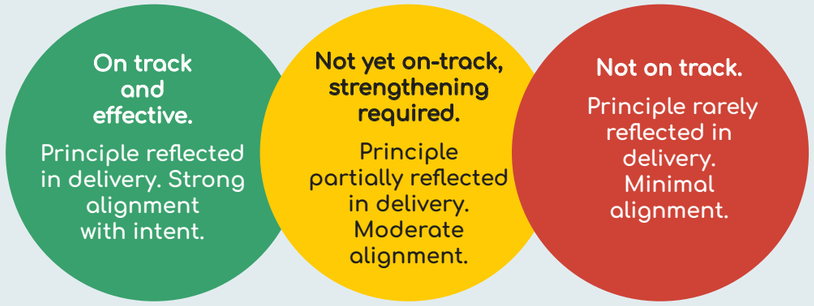
24 First Nations community-based staff completed an anonymous survey about their previous employment. This data was collected from 2020 to 2025 with a 92% response rate.

See Appendix 4 for data definitions, challenges and limitations.

Process evaluation analysis

For the process evaluation against Children's Ground's ten practice principles, evaluative judgements have been made based on the criteria outlined in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Process evaluation assessment criteria



These judgements were informed by qualitative and quantitative data collected from multiple sources, including interviews with community members, staff, management and local stakeholders, as well as quarterly staff reports and community plans. This multi-source approach ensured a comprehensive and contextually grounded evaluation of practice against the principles.

Impact evaluation analysis

A contribution analysis approach[23] was employed to explore plausible links between Children's Ground's activities and reported outcomes. This method does not aim to prove causality, rather to build the best narrative of how and why reported change occurred, considering both internal and external factors.

The contribution analysis was undertaken as follows:

- Collating a summary of '**Access and engagement before Children's Ground**', as reported by community leaders and families, collected and reviewed as context for any change and impact evident in quantitative and qualitative data.
- Analysis of Children's Ground's **internal quantitative administrative data**, identifying evidence of progress made against the short-term impact progress indicators.
- **Qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews**, identifying evidence of progress made against short-term impact progress indicators within the western evaluation framework.
- **First Nations qualitative analysis of interviews**, identifying evidence of progress made against the cultural evaluation framework. Three data analysis workshops were held with First Nations community leaders to interpret the evaluation interview findings from a First Nations perspective. This ensured that data collected about First Nations people is analysed by First Nations people.
- Most Significant Change (MSC)[24] stories collated from evaluation interviews. The MSC stories provided rich, contextual evidence of changes for individual children, adults and families, and the internal delivery and participation data and thematic interview findings demonstrate the potential for MSC story impact for the wider cohort of children and families in communities. The evaluation team grouped the stories into domains of learning, health, employment, community development and collaboration based on the overarching theme of the story. A group of eight community leaders then selected the most significant story in each domain, with their reasons for selecting the story recorded as part of the analysis.
    - As per MSC method, each MSC story was selected based on what the Selection Group valued about the story.
    - Each MSC story was also analysed through the lens of what enabled the change to occur.
    - The stories evidence the impact of the CG Approach for individual children, adults or families. They are not representative of changes for all children and families, rather demonstrate what has and can be achieved through the CG Approach.

Collectively, the evidence is presented as **Contribution Cases**, demonstrating any contribution of the CG Approach to the short-term progress indicators and early-stage impact for children and families.

A Contribution Case of evaluation evidence and findings are presented in line with the short-term progress indicator, as outlined in the western evaluation framework, demonstrating Children's Ground's short-term progress and contribution towards long-term outcomes for children and families.

Systems analysis

In the final Systems Analysis section, evaluation data was collectively analysed to understand **Causal pathways**[25] focused on the extent to which Children's Ground's Theory of Change for Darwin communities held true in practice, and the extent to which systems reform contributed.

Community voice

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 from First Nations staff and family members are labelled anonymously as '[age range], [gender], First Nations community staff/member'. In total the quotes represent 16 people from the communities leading the CG Approach, including eight family/community members and eight community staff members who were interviewed as part of the evaluation.

Quotes from local services are labelled as 'Local service provider' and represent eight local providers interviewed.



23. Mayne, J. (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect* (ILAC Brief 16).

24. Davies, R., & Dart, J. (2005). *The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) technique: A guide to its use.* https://www.mande.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/MSCGuide.pdf

25. Implementation Science Methods. (2023). *Causal Pathway Diagrams: Toolkit for selecting, designing, tailoring, and optimizing implementation strategies* (July 2023). https://impscimethods.org/application/files/9817/0448/3988/ImpSci_Methods-Toolkit_Causal-Pathway-Diagrams.pdf

Section Three: Children's Ground in Garramilla (Darwin)

The CG Approach is designed to work with a group of communities in a region, with all communities designing, governing, delivering and evaluating the Approach with their communities and collectively contributing to regional level governance, learnings and impact.

This section presents information and context about the Darwin communities leading the CG Approach and outlines how the WTA CEP phase and early-stage delivery were established and have progressed across the communities over the first five years. It also includes baseline community profiles, aspirations and priorities.

3.1 Communities leading Children's Ground

The three communities leading the CG Approach in and around Darwin are:

- **Knuckey Lagoon**: Located approx. 15km from the center of Darwin.
- **15 Mile**: Located near Palmerston, approx. 25km from the center of Darwin.
- **Minmarama / Kulaluk**[26]: Located approx. 7kms from the center of Darwin and home to a group of Larrakia Traditional Owners.

Figure 6: Children's Ground Darwin communities





Figure 6 shows the location of Children's Ground's Darwin region communities. Detailed profiles for each community are presented further on in this section.

26. To date, delivery of the CG Approach has focussed on Minmarama with some children and families from Kulaluk engaging. Governance and family connections are strongly held across both communities. Therefore, they identify as one community.

The CG Approach in Darwin arose through family and cultural relationships and leadership. An Elder leading the CG Approach in West Arnhem introduced Children's Ground to Larrakia family connections in Minmarama and Kulaluk. They in turn introduced Children's Ground to Knuckey Lagoon and 15 Mile. All three communities satisfied the Children's Ground remit to work with communities experiencing significant systemic exclusion and injustice.

This section now provides information about the context of the Darwin communities leading the CG Approach, followed by a snapshot of baseline Community Profiles.

3.2 Darwin community and regional context

Darwin sits on the sovereign unceded lands of the Larrakia Nation. As the capital of the NT, Darwin is an urban environment with a broad range of language and cultural groups. Many First Nations people living in Darwin are not from the Larrakia Nation due to generations of displacement and oppressed cultural rights.

Disruptions to language, Country and culture

In Darwin, many First Nations people are living with the intense impacts of colonisation, including the displacement of Aboriginal people from their lands, cultural fragmentation through institutional policies, settlement patterns, and ongoing systemic exclusion in housing, economy, governance and urban space.[27] [28]

Many First Nations people have grown up disconnected to their traditional lands, languages and cultural knowledge.[29] [30] Systemic racism embedded in institutions has created conditions where cultural authority is undermined and community cohesion is strained.[31] [32] In this context, lateral violence emerges as people navigate exclusion, identity policing and conflict often fuelled by fear and grief, and the contest for space and recognition.[33] [34] The effects of colonisation and racism are reproduced through the intergenerational trauma and structural inequality affecting people daily. [35] [36] [37]

While foundational ways of knowing, being and doing are inherent to all First Peoples, systems and practices of cultural knowledge and language have been significantly disrupted and harmed, having lasting impact across generations. However, this does not diminish a strong sense of culture and identity.

In the absence of consistent access to traditional structures such as Elders, cultural authorities and Country people continue to adapt to maintain, develop and express culture in many ways.

Cultural expression is universal and represents resilience and strength, however it does not mitigate the enduring impact of colonisation.

27. Day, B. (2012). *The longgrass people of Darwin: Aboriginal people in the urban environment*. Self-published anthropological report.
28. Holmes, C., & McRae-Williams, E. (2008). *An investigation into the influx of Indigenous 'visitors' to Darwin's Long Grass from remote NT communities*. Australian Institute of Criminology.
29. Day, B. (2012). *The longgrass people of Darwin: Aboriginal people in the urban environment*. Self-published anthropological report.
30. Martínez, J. (2006). Ethnic policy and practice in Darwin. In R. Ganter (Ed.), *Mixed relations: Asian–Aboriginal contact in North Australia* (pp. 122–139). University of Western Australia Press.
31. Paradies, Y. (2006). A systematic review of empirical research on self-reported racism and health. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35(4), 888–901.
32. Calma, T., Hirvonen, T., & Bray, A. (2025). *Relationship between systemic anti-Indigenous racism and social and emotional wellbeing and mental health: Recent national and international evidence, policy and programs*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
33. Fredericks, B., Adams, K., & Finlay, S. (2011). Engaging the practice of Indigenous lateral violence. *Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin*, 11(2).
34. Gooda, M. (2011). Lateral violence in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In *Social Justice Report 2011* (Chapter 2). Australian Human Rights Commission. https://humanrights.gov.au/resource-hub/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/chapter-2-lateral-violence-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-communities
35. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Racism and Indigenous wellbeing, mental health and suicide*. Australian Government.
36. McCallum, D. (2021). Law, justice and Indigenous intergenerational trauma—A genealogy. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10(4), 1–15.
37. Menzies, K. (2019). Understanding the Australian Aboriginal experience of collective, historical and intergenerational trauma. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 17(1).

Across Children's Ground's Darwin region, families in one community live on their traditional lands; families in two communities largely do not; and the population consists of diverse languages and Nations. One community experiences high population mobility. Another has a high number of families from the Stolen Generations.

People in all three communities talked about experiencing significant disruption to their knowledge of and connection to their first language, cultural practice and Country.

The CG Approach was established and designed by First Nations communities where families are closely connected to their traditional lands, with a shared language and kinship systems. The Darwin region, by contrast, consists of three distinct communities.

Each holds its own cultural and community strengths, with some family and cultural connections between communities. Largely, though, the Darwin region comprises three individual communities with unique cultural demographics and histories.



Town Camp communities

The communities leading the CG Approach are officially recognised as 'town camps'; however, community members prefer not to use this term when referring to their communities. As this remains the official terminology, it is used here where necessary.

There are 43 town camps across the Northern Territory and six in Darwin. [38]

These are distinct Aboriginal communities that emerged as Darwin and other NT towns were colonised, with Aboriginal land progressively appropriated and Aboriginal people's movement and residence controlled through discriminatory legislation, protection policies and welfare regimes. These policies excluded many Aboriginal people from living within the formal boundaries of towns and cities, leading to the establishment of fringe camps that later evolved into permanent communities. [39] [40] [41] [42] Darwin community members recall the houses in these camps being called 'chicken coops' by the public.

There is a long history of First Nations people living in town camps experiencing disproportionate health, economic and social challenges.[43] [44] Northern Territory town camps reflect dispossession and chronic underinvestment, resulting in overcrowded housing, poor infrastructure, insecure tenure and fragmented services.[45] [46] These conditions drive health inequities and social exclusion, despite strong community governance and advocacy for self-determination. [47] [48]

It should be noted that for Aboriginal people, these communities are homes with long histories, and for many, a source of pride and strong identity. Town camps are among the few remaining areas of land in more urban contexts where Aboriginal people can live together as a community.

38. Northern Territory Government. (2024). About town camps. Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development. https://dhlgcd.nt.gov.au/homelands-and-town-camps/town-camps-and-community-living-areas/about-town-camps
39. Collmann, J. (1988). *Fringe dwellers: Aboriginal people and community in Darwin*. University of Queensland Press.
40. Heppell, M., & Wigley, J. J. (1981). *Black out in Alice: A history of the establishment and development of town camps in Alice Springs*. Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University.
41. Khalidi, L. (1998). *Aboriginal town camps: A case study of power and marginalisation in the Northern Territory*. North Australia Research Unit, Australian National University.
42. Memmott, P. (1990). *Aboriginal town camps and self-determination in Australia*. Aboriginal Studies Press.
43. Australian Human Rights Commission. (2007). Indigenous disadvantage and self-determination. https://humanrights.gov.au
44. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). Social determinants and Indigenous health. https://www.aihw.gov.au
45. Memmott, P. (1989). *Aboriginal town camps and settlements in Alice Springs: A social and historical analysis*. Tangentyere Council.
46. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *Housing and homelessness*. In Australia's health 2024. AIHW.
47. Goldfields Migrant Justice Action Unit (GMJAU). (2018). *A tale of (at least) three reports: Agency and discourse in the Alice Springs Town Camps*.
48. Torzillo, P., Pholeros, P., Rainow, S., Barker, G., Sowerbutts, T., & Short, T. (2008). *The state of health hardware in Aboriginal communities in rural and remote Australia*. Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health, 32(1), 7–11.



Mobility in communities

Population mobility is not unique to Darwin communities. People often travel to visit family and access services.

As a more urban environment, the centralisation of essential health and other services means Darwin communities attract a high number of families travelling to access them. This often involves whole families moving in and out of communities for periods of time.

Furthermore, some Darwin communities were originally established as temporary settlements for people from more remote communities and while there is a population of permanent residents, some areas still experience highly transient populations.

Children's Ground's experience of population mobility in Darwin communities has been somewhat different to that found in other communities leading Children's Ground. In Darwin, mobility has often included new and different family groups moving in and out of communities for periods of time. This was particularly the case as COVID-19 restrictions lessened. In other Children's Ground communities, mobility is also common but largely involves the same family groups and population.

In Darwin, the extent to which new and different family groups move in and out of communities has significantly impacted service design, delivery, continuity and sustainability. It has required a different way of engaging and working with communities, with an ongoing need to build relationships with new families. Understanding and evaluating the impact of this mobility on the CG Approach's long-term outcomes will be important over the 25-year period.

In addition to population mobility, compared with other Children's Ground regions, the 'boundaries' of the Darwin communities include more family members engaging with the CG Approach while living outside the defined Children's Ground communities (e.g. in other Darwin suburbs).

These factors have resulted in an ongoing WTA phase and process, while at the same time working to transition to early-stage delivery of the CG Approach as resources allowed. As an example of population mobility, only 47% of people engaged in the initial WTA CEP phase then engaged in early-stage delivery, largely because they were no longer living in the community.

While this mobility can be challenging for social cohesion, the communities leading the CG Approach often provide a safe place for families to stay temporarily while accessing services from Darwin as the regional centre. Rather than being seen solely as an implementation challenge, mobility has been understood within the context of broader family, cultural and community connections.

The unique context of each Darwin community required flexible and tailored delivery and evaluation of the CG Approach. One of the greatest challenges was building trust and relationships with mobile populations of people and communities that had experienced decades of short-term service delivery based on service rather than community needs.

3.3 Baseline community profile

As part of the WTA CEP process, Children's Ground undertakes a thorough review and documentation of the community context, including understanding each community's history, population (by key age groups), mapping service access and engagement across key areas of the CG Approach (early learning, health promotion, employment, cultural engagement and community governance and development), mapping community aspirations, worries, needs and goals and mapping community infrastructure.

Internally, baseline community profiles for each community leading the CG Approach in Darwin have been developed including a community history, population demographic data and community-reported service and system access and leadership. These profiles will be used by each community as their internal longitudinal evaluation baseline and some of this information has been included in this report without identifying communities.

Community population mapping

As part of the baseline community profiles, Children's Ground undertakes internal population mapping with each community to capture an in-depth understanding of the number of people living in or visiting community (both frequently and infrequently) and family mobility.

This is in recognition of the limitations in accessing data for small community areas with specific boundaries, and the challenges with under-representation of First Nations people in national and jurisdictional data collections.

See Appendix 2 for further information about Children's Ground's internal population mapping.

Internal population mapping includes allocating each individual a 'residency status' as: Permanent residents; Frequent visitors; or Infrequent visitors, as reported by community-based staff and leaders. Children's Ground welcomes engagement of everyone within the communities, including visiting children and families, so the residency status enables communities to understand population numbers, and reach and engagement of residents and visitors. As a result, Children's Ground's internal population data can be higher than that recorded by the Australian census data.

Table 2 shows the population of each community as defined by the 2021 census data and Children's Ground's internal population mapping.

Table 2: Darwin community populations

Population	15 Mile	Knuckey Lagoon	Minmarama	Kulaluk
Children's Ground Baseline 2020 data	88[49]	128	85	40
ABS (2021)	66[50]	113[51]	145[52]	33[53]
Children's Ground: Permanent residents (2024)	69	42	68	25
Children's Ground: Permanent residents & Frequent visitors (2024)	210	82	109	36

Note: The Census data is a count which is subject to an undercount. The Census count is not a population estimate as many people do not complete the Census for various reasons. This contributes to why Children's Ground's internal population figures are higher than Census counts.

Over time, as delivery of the CG Approach increases from the growth to full model, a 'service population' is defined, including permanent residents and frequent visitors only.

Throughout the growth model and in the early stages of delivery populations, mapping and engagement data includes all people who live in and/or visit and stay in a community, frequently or infrequently. Therefore, early-stage population data should be read with caution.

49. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *2016 Census of Population and Housing: Indigenous Location QuickStats – 15 Mile Community*. https://www.abs.gov.auhttps://www.abs.gov.au
50. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *2021 Census of Population and Housing: Indigenous Location QuickStats – 15 Mile Community*. https://www.abs.gov.auhttps://www.abs.gov.au
51. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *2021 Census of Population and Housing: Indigenous Location QuickStats – Knuckey Lagoon*. https://www.abs.gov.auhttps://www.abs.gov.au
52. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *2021 Census of Population and Housing: Indigenous Location QuickStats – Minmarama Park (ILOC70300304)*. https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/ILOC70300304
53. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *2021 Census of Population and Housing: Indigenous Location QuickStats – Kulaluk*. https://www.abs.gov.auhttps://www.abs.gov.au

Before Children's Ground

The three Darwin communities differed substantially to each other in their starting conditions, participation patterns and population stability. In some communities, population mobility made it difficult to establish a consistent cohort of participants over time. During WTA and early-stage delivery participation and engagement varied community by community.

Therefore, collecting quantitative community-wide baseline information was not considered the most appropriate baseline method. Consequently, baseline information was collated through people describing their experiences. Measuring change in service access and engagement draws on both qualitative participant experiences and quantitative service delivery and engagement data.

This section presents a high-level overview of baseline information as reported by each community. More detailed baseline information is provided throughout the report in the Process and Impact findings sections.

Baseline service access, engagement and empowerment in communities

Despite Darwin being a broadly well-serviced capital city, during the WTA CEP phase, families in each of the three Darwin town camp communities reported challenges with access to services and programs delivered within their communities and/or support to access services based outside of their community, including health, early learning, after-hours programs, etc.

Service access and engagement was reportedly often limited by transport and financial insecurity as well as minimal knowledge about service availability and navigating service systems. From the service's perspective, organisations reported being too stretched and under-resourced to provide regular or any transport or to conduct consistent outreach.

This satisfied a key criterion for Children's Ground to work with communities experiencing significant exclusion and systemic disadvantage.

Table 3 provides a baseline snapshot for each Darwin community, reported by people from each community, about service access, cultural engagement and economic and leadership opportunities before Children's Ground.



Table 3: Community Profile baseline snapshot

Baseline: Before Children's Ground	Community one	Community two	Community three
Community governance and development			
Did the community have access to a fit-for-purpose intergenerational community centre?	SOME	SOME	NO
Did the community have established community and cultural governance protocols and processes?	SOME	NO	SOME
Did the community have a plan that outlined their aspirations, needs and goals?	SOME	NO	NO
Did people have service and program delivery in their community that was based on their aspirations and needs?	NO	NO	NO
Was there evidence of consistent and sustained service/program delivery in the community?	NO	NO	NO
Were regular community events and celebrations being held?	SOME	SOME	NO
Economic development			
Did the community have access to employment opportunities in their community?	SOME	SOME	NO
Did the community have access to economic opportunities, other than employment?	NO	NO	NO
Learning and wellbeing			
Did the community have access to early years learning in their community?	SOME	NO	NO
Were a majority of children engaging with early years learning?	SOME	SOME	NO
Did children, young people and families have access to regular after-hours activities?	SOME	NO	NO
Were a majority of children and young people engaging with after-hours activities?	SOME	NO	NO
Health and wellbeing			
Did the community have access to health promotion in their community?	SOME	SOME	NO
Were a majority of children, young people and adults engaging with health promotion?	NO	NO	NO
Were community members easily accessing local health clinics?	SOME	NO	SOME
Cultural engagement and wellbeing			
Were the majority of people in the community living on their traditional lands/country?	NO	NO	YES
Were a majority of children, young people and adults engaging with cultural practices, including teaching and learning first language and culture?	SOME	SOME	SOME

Summary of community aspirations, values and priorities

This is a summary of community aspirations, values and some priorities collated from each community's Community Plan[54] and presented as a collective under key themes.

We want happy and safe communities for our families and for our children and families to feel safe in our homes.

We want our communities to be places where there is no trouble and people have fun without alcohol.

We want to have good-looking communities that are attractive for people to live in now and in future generations.

We are the experts in our community, we have our own solutions and can create our own growth and change.

We want our communities to make the decisions for our children and families. We always need to listen to the old people and be led by them.

We want our people to be empowered, independent and working together with other people and groups in Darwin and other places.

We need outsiders to respect us and listen to us. We want honesty and trust between the families and services.

Many of us have worked so hard to make sure our communities are a place that is good for children and families. It makes us tired when people who don't live here are making the decisions.

We want our children to grow strong into learning about their culture. Our cultures are under threat. We need to make sure it is not wiped out.

Our children and families need to know their cultures and their languages. We are proud of ourselves and where we come from. Our children and old people need to be together. The old people hold stories and knowledge, and the children are our future.

Our knowledge needs to be transferred to the young people. We need to teach traditional ways. Many of us have tried to do this before here and in other communities. Funding keeps getting taken away. We want this to happen. We want Children's Ground to help make this happen.

We want the children to grow up to be strong in their culture and their language and to see the world and the people too. We want them to be smart and to know that there is racism.

We want our kids to have a good western education for better health and employment in their future.

Our health is important. We need people looking after themselves and each other.

We need employment for our families, like jobs and running businesses and organisations.

It was hard after the intervention and when they took CDEP away because people couldn't work or be involved in activities here in our community.

We want our families caring for each other. It is important to bring the families and children together.

We have family that don't live in our community. They live other places around Darwin. We want them to be able to join in with the things we are doing.

Families need more things to do. There is lots of drinking because there is nothing for anyone to do. Nothing for young people to do. Nothing for people to be proud of. Families need something to make them happy like hunting and fishing and telling stories for kids.

In the past, families used to come together lots. Funerals were done the proper way. We had regular celebration events, where children and adults had a great time. Outside services worked with us to make this happen. We have ideas for this to happen again.

54. This is a summary of community aspirations, values and some priorities collated from each community's Community Plan and presented as a collective under key themes.

3.4 Establishing and growing the CG Approach

This section presents an overview of how the WTA CEP phase and early-stage growth model delivery was established and progressed over the first five years of delivery in Darwin.

Across 2020, 2021 and into early 2022, Children's Ground undertook the initial WTA phase in the three Darwin communities focusing on engaging families and community members, building relationships, delivering early years learning activities and community events.

In 2020, COVID-19 created an environment of uncertainty for many people. While relationships with Darwin community leaders and families were in their infancy at this stage, when leaders reported that other services had stopped attending the community, they asked Children's Ground to go house-by-house and provide health promotion, education and preventative support and food security in relation to COVID-19 where it was requested. This was undertaken by Children's Ground staff adhering to all COVID-19 protocols.

Subsequently, supporting communities to respond to and keep safe from COVID-19 became part of the 'Act' within the WTA period because it was a key priority for each community. As COVID-19 crisis management diminished, the Children's Ground team delivered early years learning and health promotion as part of the WTA phase.

538 people of all ages engaged with the CG Approach during the initial WTA CEP phase.

By the end of 2021, following the WTA, the regional First Nations governance group and Children's Ground's Board decided to progress to a small-scale growth model for early-stage delivery in the three Darwin communities based on:

- Community engagement, need and invitation to begin the CG Approach.
- Community governance and leadership.
- Strategic development of Children's Ground in the Top End region.

Progress and resources were monitored and reported to the Board quarterly. There was a shared understanding of the following risks:

- There is an unknown time frame and limited financial resources for extensive growth that need to be monitored closely and managed carefully.
- Limited resources may see inadequate resources to meet demand.
- The growth model would impact the operational integrity and quality of the CG Approach compared to delivery of the full CG Approach.
- The growth model could create operational and evaluation challenges and place stress on the organisation.

This evaluation shows that while some of these risks continue, that implementation of the growth model was a positive decision for children and families in the Darwin communities.

In early 2022, the transition from WTA to early-stage CG Approach growth model delivery began, with ongoing community engagement remaining a high priority. The growth model presented an opportunity to enable grass-roots model design and development at the pace of each community.

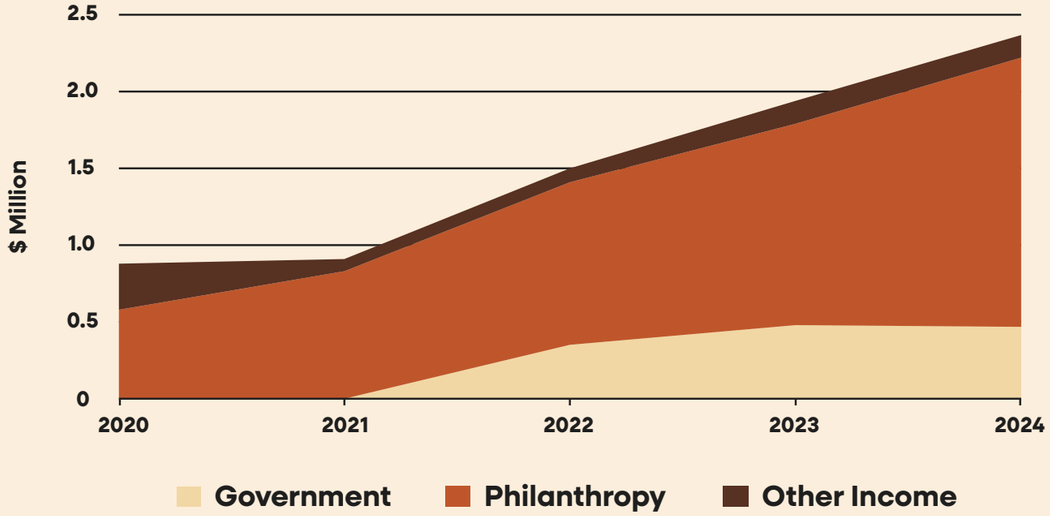
After beginning early-stage delivery, in early 2023 in one community there was a decision by the community leaders and Children's Ground to cease delivery in that community and refocus on WTA. In 2024, delivery of the CG Approach recommenced in that community.

By the end of 2024, all three communities were in early-stage delivery, with ongoing WTA and community engagement, which is central to the CG Approach delivery, irrespective of the community context.

An outline of what was being delivered by the end of this evaluation period (2024) within the small-scale growth model is provided in Section 4.2. It is compared with an outline of the fully resourced CG Approach delivery. When implementing a CG Approach growth model, timeframes, progress and outcome expectations are scaled back to reflect what is possible within the resource limitations.

Over this evaluation period, funding and delivery was monitored. Funding began through philanthropy and increased through a combination of government and philanthropic grants and general donations (other income). Graph 1 shows the year-on-year funding increase from 2020 to 2024.

Graph 1: CG Approach annual funding growth year-on-year, by funding source



Note: For 2020, the high amount of 'Other Income' reflects monies received through job-keeper payments during COVID-19.

The graph shows that over this evaluation period, there was a gradual but modest increase in funding resources for community engagement capacity and early-stage delivery.



Growth in delivery occurred in:

- Learning & Wellbeing, enabling increased delivery in early years and after-hours learning.
- Health & Wellbeing, enabling dedicated maternal and child health delivery which was not funded when early-stage implementation began.
- Economic Development & Wellbeing, enabling a focus on community-based workforce development to increase community employment and support.
- Community Development & Wellbeing, enabling community governance and planning processes to be enhanced and embedded.

By the end of 2024, approximately 25% of the full CG Approach model was being delivered across the integrated service areas, with the exception of Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing, which remained without dedicated resources.

This growth was determined based on securing funding dedicated to these specific delivery areas.

The modest growth in funding and delivery was positive. However, there remains a significant gap between resources secured and resources required to continue growing towards delivering the full CG Approach.

As at the start of 2026, the funding gap to reach delivery of the full CG Approach in Darwin was approx. $7.2M. This is based on Children's Ground's standard overtime phasing of delivery growth.

Section Four: Evaluation findings and analysis

As a 25-year strategy, the first few years of the CG Approach aim to embed the foundational conditions for children, families and whole communities as building blocks implemented over time to achieve long-term, sustainable change.

Within the CG Approach, access and engagement are two fundamental progress indicators over the first 1–3 years of early-stage delivery. Within a growth model, access and engagement take longer to establish and build upon.

To achieve these short-term outcomes, the early stages of the CG Approach focus on building trust, places of safety, empowerment, community leadership and ownership, and consistent engagement opportunities for children and families.

It was important for Children's Ground to work with leaders from each community to set clear and achievable expectations with the growth model resources available.

The evaluation of Children's Ground responds to the three high level evaluation questions that cover the areas of process effectiveness, impact of the CG Approach and system reform.

Development of the CG Approach occurred differently in each community, with their experiences collected community-by-community (internally) and evaluated as the Darwin region in this public report. Most data and findings are presented at a regional level, with some presented by-community to reflect the unique progress in each.

This evaluation findings and analysis section is presented in four parts:

1. Summary of findings
2. First Nations findings analysis
3. Process evaluation findings and analysis
4. Impact evaluation findings and analysis

This section is then followed by a Systems analysis and discussion.

Summary of early-stage change and impact

Is the Children's Ground Approach having an impact for children and families?

Before the Children's Ground Approach, Darwin evidenced:

- Limited holistic community governance
- Limited engagement in early learning activities
- Limited engagement in health literacy and promotion
- Inconsistent, ad hoc or no access to existing local services
- Minimal opportunities to engage as family and community groups

Five years into the Children's Ground Approach →

The CG Approach in Darwin has evidenced early-stage change and impact for children and families.

From 2020 to 2024, 940 children, young people and adults engaged with the CG Approach.



90
children (0-5 years) engaged in cultural and western early learning.

177
children and young people (0-17 years) engaged with after-hours learning.



24
community-based First Nations staff employed with CG.

33%
working in their first paid job.

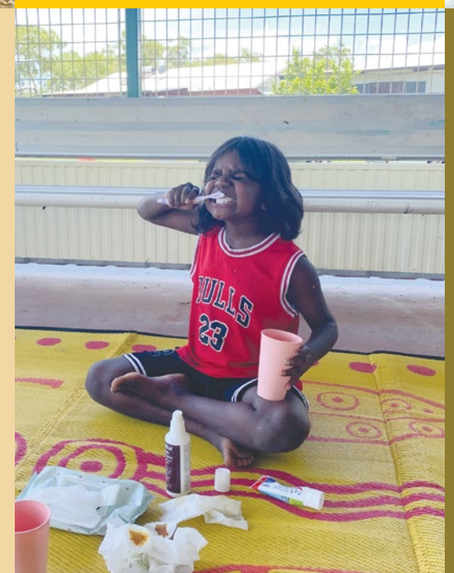


56
people have actively engaged in community governance and decision-making.



180
children (0-8 years) engaged in health promotion and support, including nutrition, healthy behaviours/routine, physical activity, etc. Including:

133
children (0-8 years) engaged with social/emotional wellbeing promotion.

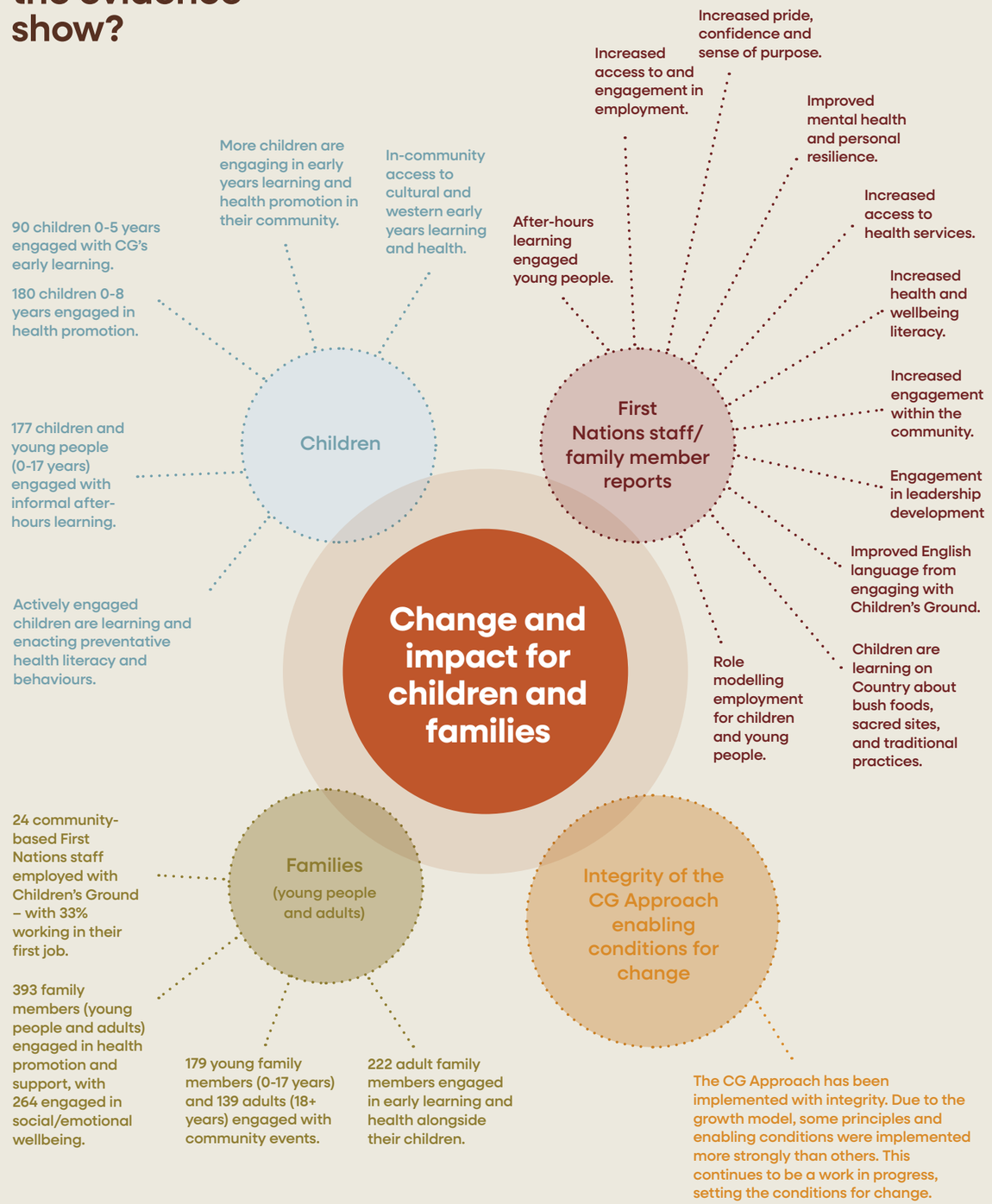


393
family members (young people and adults) engaged in health promotion and support. Including:

264
engaged in social/emotional wellbeing promotion.

146
supported to access clinical health and wellbeing services.

What does the evidence show?



Is the Children's Ground Approach being implemented effectively and as intended, in line with practice principles?

Delivery against the CG Approach's ten practice principles is progressing well in some areas, while others have been compromised by the growth model's limited resources.

↓

PROGRESS ACROSS CHILDREN'S GROUND'S TEN PRINCIPLES →

ON TRACK

PROGRESSING

NOT ON TRACK

	PROGRESS	SUMMARY OF PROGRESS	PROGRESS	SUMMARY OF PROGRESS
	🟢	**Child, family & community-led:** Regional and community-level First Nations governance has been established and is reportedly following cultural governance protocols. Community governance has strengthened. Increasing engagement in all levels of governance remains a high priority, requiring adequate resourcing.	🟡	**In-community (place-based):** In-community delivery occurred in all three communities to a degree, but not yet to the extent intended. In two communities, place-based delivery was enabled by Children's Ground support to refurbish existing community centres.
	🟢	**Start early:** Early learning and health promotion have been delivered regularly in communities, with young children actively engaged.	🟡	**Innovation – combining the old and new ways:** Cultural and western delivery has occurred in all three communities. Whilst this has been challenging at times in these highly colonised settings, staff and families remain strongly committed to it.
	🟢	**Deliver the whole, not the bits:** Integrated CG Approach delivery has been established, with all service areas being implemented to the extent possible within the growth model resources. Effective collaborations with some local services have been established and strengthened over time – collectively contributing to reduced service access barriers for actively engaged children and families. However, both require strengthening.	🟡	**Expect and deliver the best:** Establishing and embedding cultural and western standards, processes and policies has progressed but has been impacted by the limitations of the growth model's resources. Ongoing resources and strengthening are required.
	🟢	**Assume and celebrate ability:** Environments and opportunities for children, young people and adults to apply and develop their strengths and talents have been created effectively.	🔴	**Critical mass (75%):** In 2024 Children's Ground engaged with approximately 60% of children aged 0–8 years and 41% of adults (18+ years) across all Children's Ground communities.
	🟢	**Culturally safe:** Community staff and family members reported experiencing Children's Ground as a culturally safe environment – an outcome significantly enabled by community-based employment and governance.	🔴	**Stay for the long-term:** The longevity of the CG Approach can only be assessed over time. However, the long-term commitment has been embraced as a key strength of the CG Approach, underpinning the community's confidence, trust and commitment to engage.

First Nations analysis

Children's Ground is community led. The leadership is in community. We do governance every day. Community makes every decision - being collective together.

Everyone knows that Children's Ground is a safe place. Safety comes with everyone being responsible, support and encourage ownership, empowered.

Delivering in community has been on and off. There has been a lot happening in the community, like we go through sorry business a lot. Children's Ground respects and follows community and cultural protocols.

Changes in kids learning are there with Children's Ground. Children's Ground is helping children who only speak their first language and helping some kids who only speak English. We want to do more walk and talk [family and community engagement].

Every house needs more kids involved. We need more activities for families coming together.

Health is happening in every session. Bush trips support social and emotional wellbeing with old people telling stories. Kids are learning about health. But health has not been enough. We need more delivery.

For many of us, Darwin is home but not our Country. And that's [one of] the cultural learning challenges. But we are feeling empowered, to be stronger and go out looking for all of our connections too. At the same time, we are trying to have our kids' identity strong. And it actually frames everything that we're doing... and why we're doing it.

We need more training and education to empower. We need more young people governance. We are employing young people, but we need more of it.

The needs for different communities. We need more funding. More money to tell our story or more money to run our programs. More money to keep Children's Ground around.



Figure 3

Children's Ground's First Nations Community Cultural Evaluation Framework

"I like everything. I believe this is an organisation that can change the system. This is an organisation where I feel comfortable in. This is an organisation where they're not telling me what to do about my life and my kids."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

4.1 First Nations findings analysis

This analysis was undertaken by 11 First Nations staff from the communities leading Children's ground in Darwin. They analysed de-identified qualitative data from evaluation interviews with First Nations families and staff which informed evaluation findings against their cultural evaluation framework (pictured).





Lilypads: community priorities

Children's Ground is a place for everyone. It's a safe place. We can be ourselves. It's a comfortable and safe space. This allows us to be us.

Being within Children's Ground allows us to be who we are. Everyone knows that Children's Ground is a safe place.

But it's also, the safe place comes with everyone being responsible, supportive and encouraging ownership, empowered, kids are empowered, there is hope, aspiration, we want to be a better community. That all comes under feeling safe. Security in all areas, feeling protected and safe. Peace of mind, connection and a sense of belonging. That's for everyone with being on Country, which brings the peace of mind, connection and sense of belonging.

Children's Ground, being place-based, was very seasonal, so it was up to the community as in if there were community staff to work that day, did Children's Ground staff feel comfortable and feeling safe to go out without community staff? So, with some workers we could rely on them. We could just sit in community, they go off, do their own thing, whatever. But then when they had new workers, they were too scared to be in community themselves. We had to teach them, show them how to work with our communities. We teach them how to do interactions with community in a culturally right way.

Being in community, delivering in community has not been that good so far, but we're moving towards that. It has been on and off. And also, there has been a lot happening in the community, like we go through Sorry Business a lot or otherwise we are out on our homelands and that affects being in community as well. In one community, being in community is a challenge without the infrastructure. We need more infrastructure in each community – the media room and homework centre. This comes under supporting being place-based. Children's Ground is always working with what is happening in the community. And yeah, and no matter what, hiccups and whatever, we make things happen, we make things work. When one community centre had no power [electricity], we had no power for nearly 18 months, but still there was program delivery. We were still working in there.

Children's Ground has supported working in the community with community mob, taking community mob out of community, we have got employment. And with Children's Ground there is flexibility in terms of working, that's good. Children's Ground is helping with our money story [delivery funding]. Children's Grounds also created a savers [payroll savings] where families can have a savings account. So, if we are out of pay, we can access that for the power, or food vouchers. So, they are supporting with money story.

Family money story is getting better, we are employed. We need more collaboration with Centrelink so that they come in. Some people don't have transport to go to Centrelink. We want them to come to community.

We need more support for them young people with employment like getting tax file numbers and helping them become independent, teaching them basic life skills. Children's Ground is doing that, but we need more of it.

With working with Children's Ground we feel pride, feeling good, the confidence, the trust, fun and happy.

Children's Ground respects community, cultural protocols. Our own, on our own. Role modelling comes because of employment. We need more opportunity for everyone to work and participate. Every voice matters. Community staff feel obligated, responsible for doing it the right way. Everyone being responsible.

Ripples: our governance

Children's Ground is community-led. The leadership is in community. And the independence with the community leaders themselves. Community decision-making, governance, planning, planning for the long term, deciding services, who and who can come in. Community makes every decision. The leadership within communities comes down to being collective together. Everyone needs to be working together, or it takes a toll on one person. That comes down to having good governance. That comes from the governance, not relying on one person but teamwork. Everyone working together is important. Children's Ground respects and follows community and cultural protocols, Sorry Business, permissions follow communities. So, there's respect for community decisions.

We do governance every day. We don't always call it a meeting but in sessions or within the walk and talk there is governance happening.

It's just with the general conversations, "Hey Aunty [a community staff member], what are we doing today? Oh, I need this. I want to do that. Oh, well, let's go talk to them". That's just governance every day. It's happening even for after-hours too. Young people are also involved in governance. We need more support with young people governance. It comes back to governance and more walk and talk. We are employing young people, but we need more of it.

Also making sure that we go into sacred sites getting permission. And that's where also the governance comes out. You got to go through everyone. You can't just put yourself in another man's Country without asking. Not living in one's own Country means that we have to ask through our connections before we go there.

And that's also the local solutions. Local people know and they are the decision makers. We are the governance.

Children's Ground staff are good with respecting cultural protocols, like when they come in, we always introduce. We do community protocols. We got community protocols for each community. Every staffing [recruitment] coming through within Children's Ground must go through community. It must go through communities. So, we are across and aware of who the staff are and that is happening well at Children's Ground. But we need more governance meetings.

We need more training and education to empower. We, the community staff need to be the strong ones to help support our community because we are the leaders.

We community staff want more training.

Needs to come from everyone, so that goes to governance. Just everything needs to come from everyone. It's not one voice, it's all voices, all voices matters

Fire in the centre: our strength and healing

For many of us, Darwin is home but not our Country. Because not all of us are Larrakia. Because we live on Larrakia Country. And some of us are related to Larrakia. Many people are not living in their in their own Country, but Darwin is home to 100%, but about 60% of us are not living on Country. We are connected. But we're still doing the learning on Country and whatever. And that's the cultural learning challenges, not learning on our own Country. It's also hard with our old people gone, all our teachers.

So, we're trying to strengthen those old people's knowledge and everything. There are some families out there that are trying to get back to and find their identity with their own mob. Still, it's still even happening till today. Our First Nations mob, we will take someone in to guide them, and it gives them the strength to go back to look for their own mob too, within this journey with Children's Ground, here, this whole story, it's given some of us our own story. So, because it's of our kids now, they want to know stories. So, we have to go back and do that to keep that generational thing going.



One community leader reflected:

> *I remember, I heard stories about our grandmother. There was a lot of families that got taken from everywhere across Australia. And then most of the families ended up here on our country, Larrakia country. So, our grandmother and that, they adopted families into our family. So, like, we got that connection with other families that I've got people adopted into our family group. And I only just got told about that, like probably a year ago. My sister, she's older than me, so she would have more of that knowledge from all the old people. But maybe before I was born, she used to sit down with them under the banyan tree and they tell stories about what had happened in the history of it all. And then she just passes it on. And we tell our kids that story.*

So that's the process of discovering, process of trying to reconnect. And we're in the process of that. And at the same time, we are trying to have our kids' identity strong by us connecting and trying to figure out and also at the same time trying to teach that to our kids. That's the story with the old people and the cultural roots. And it actually frames everything that we're doing. Yeah, it does. And why we're doing it.

And while we're doing it, you know we're doing this for the generation of our children because the children these days, they don't know the history of it all. Our kids are just doing this research in school about history. But with us telling the old stories about the history, it kind of gives kids a reflection on what happened to the old people when they got taken. That's very strong because that sort of defines why we're doing everything inside this painting [cultural evaluation framework].



Line connecting the circles: connections between the communities

We worry about everyone. Every voice matters, you know. Not just one voice. Yeah. No one left behind, missing out. We worry about everyone. We have this whole story. We can't just stop and worry about our household. We know the whole community matters. Also, it's connected, communities are connected and also within community. Everybody's connected.

The lines also mean that we, communities want to collaborate, work together, we want to share stories. We want to work together because not everyone gets to go back to their homelands and don't have access or whatever. This is connection, engaging with other kids and kids making new friends. Kids are making connections with other kids through Children's Ground. But we need more. We need more in our money story to help us, to get together us communities. The kids need to learn off each other. They need to share culture with each other, not just us adults. To collaborate as one. Not only that but here in Darwin we are all connected by marriages and that.



Shapes along the line: Elders

Stolen generation impacts identity, it was taken away, lost connection. Still trying to find connection. That then is that line connecting communities in the picture with the dots representing elders. For some of us, all of our grandparents got taken from their Country. It's had an impact on everything, it really has. For some of us not even living on our Country, we're in our kids', our partners' community. But that has empowered us to be stronger and go out looking for all of our connections too.



Footprints: learning and growing

Changes in kids' learning are there with Children's Ground. With English, the schools are also helping with English. And Children's Ground is helping in first language. Home is contributing, also some schools. Children's Ground is helping children who only speak their first language and helping some kids who only speak English, we want them to walk in two worlds, be culturally strong and then have the Western world understanding. We need more support for kids in mainstream school, for older kids.

So, looking at the little ones. We noticed from baby talk, now they're talking, you know, proper English. So English learning is good.

Children's Ground is helping with English language and is helping them walk in two worlds.

Some kids only speak English or English is their second language and also services are in English. So, we need to make sure they are learning English language.

Children's Ground is helping with first language sometimes. It's happening at home as well and it's happening at [learning] sessions. Children's Ground is also supporting to make room for them to do that. Children's Ground is providing that space for people to speak in language to their kids.

We need community staff from each language group. Because we're just learning and for some people it's the first time that they've been spoken to in language during the [learning] session also. So, if you come in, parent coming in with their kids and I am going to sit down with my daughters there. That's not my language, but she going to learn that language because that's the language that the session delivering is happening in. So, we just need more people speaking their language. We need people from different clan groups, speaking their own tongue.

We want what they are learning to take it home. What they learn from Children's Ground. Some kids they go to school they come home sad because they are not learning how they want to at school, as they are taught here [at Children's Ground].

We need more outside of school education. We want more after-hours education. Lot of schools say, "Oh, Children's Ground is there", but we don't want Children's Ground to do everything, we want to branch it out for our story to be bigger and better. Children's Ground is helping with kids learning and development, but we need other organisations too. We need to know that our older kids are also getting help, we want to get help from schools too. Schools should get involved with community more. We are getting all the loving caring support for our 0–5-year-olds but then they go off to school. Also, with schools like [a primary school] was involved but then it stopped. We need more support from other organisations, schools and other services to help with kids learning.

We want more activities with Children's Ground. There are activities now, but we need more from Children's Ground.

We need more support for kids in mainstream school. Homework Club was happening but now stopped. We want them back. Some things were happening, but now they've stopped due to Children's Ground staff leaving, like with the homework club, that was going really well.

Children's Ground is all about the kids and children's development to make them culturally strong, teaching them knowledge, food, hunting, gathering, storytelling. We want families bringing in whatever they can [into learning sessions]. Just doing it with them here because families are the teachers there, they can teach. They can come and bring whatever they want to teach. And doing more cultural learning like that. We need more parents to do more learning, cultural learning with Children's Ground. We are kid's teachers. Cultural teaching happens at home, too. We need more regular cultural learning. We need more language. We need more cultural teachers. We need more camps. We need to know more about sacred sites and men's and women's spaces. We need languages resources for different languages. We need language and cultural learning for young people and adults.

Communities are different. It's very hard to get a cultural teacher on the ground. Some of us can't speak our tongue fluently, so it's hard. It's different for each community. Learning is always different in each community, but that's why we always come together. If someone can't make bush medicine in their community, they go sit with Aunty [from another community] and sit down and do the bush medicine with them and their groups. Learning from others. We all want to learn but we do it in different ways.

We've been wanting to get together with the other communities for years now and we're still waiting. To go and join, you know, take kids to another community. We've been talking about this for a while. We've been talking about it together and saying, look, we'll come down and we'll go do cultural learning. We've been asking for that and because we all come from different Country, we want to learn of each other like, different cultures. We are all the same, but we have different cultures, we got to learn from others. For some of us, our background is stolen generation. So, we're coming to learn, we learn something every day with Children's Ground and sitting with these mob and we're open to learning other languages and other ways because some of us don't get to do it. Some of us are not sitting on our Country. They're [Traditional Owners] allowing us. Because at the end of day, we are one mob.

Wanting more walk and talk [family and community engagement] is a big theme. Yeah, every house, needs more kids involved, needs walk and talk consistently. Consistency is big. We want to share big decisions. Work with everyone participating. So that's the walk and talk. We need more reporting to parents for learning. We need more parents engaged in learning.



Animals and plants (including the spirit fire in the centre): our health story

Health is happening in every session. Bush trips support social and emotional wellbeing with old people telling stories. Kids learning about health. That's going good. Young women group is happening, kids learning about health, families are learning to do recipes too. We are happy with Children's Ground support for times that we needed, things go down, like in COVID. We have the basic bits, but we don't want the bits, we want the whole. We need more delivery. Health has not been enough, we need more. Children's Ground is providing us the bus to be able to go for transport to clinic, emergency and to get emergency medications. Children's Ground is our main support but also helping us to branch out by providing transport and access to other networks [services].

In all our communities we need more in every aspect of health. Like ears checks. You got other services not listening to us for health. We want more regular health support, like other services doing regular health checks within our community. Coming in more often, not just once a month or every now and then.

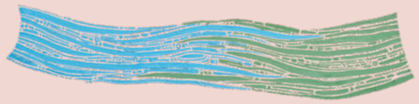
We want more health check-ups in the community. We need more health services coming into the community.

We need more health support with social and emotional wellbeing, and other health support is needed. A lot of teenagers need support for social and emotional wellbeing activities. Women's group needs to do more. I don't get many women coming to the sessions sometimes. Men's group nothing. One of the communities don't have that boys' group or girls' group. The only thing we have is like all ins (when Children's Ground staff from all teams go out to the community and do integrated meetings alongside a community gathering where everyone from the community is invited for a meal) and the after-hours. We could have women's group with the early years. So that's where we can get all the parents coming. It has worked a couple of times. But you need more engagement, that's what. It's just the support too, the support of walk and talk. And more engagement in more walk and talk.

There is no staff to do boys' group. We just need someone to come on board with us so we can get our boys' group up and running. We don't have nothing for boys. There is one of the things in there about not having enough for men and boys for you to get more parents to come along. Having women's group and men's group, that's one way to bring it together. We need more activities for families coming together, community coming together like barbecues, after-hours activities, movie nights and community activities.

Where we don't have community centre [in one of the communities] that has an impact on health, like we have got poisonous grass you know. We need the community centre. Want a safe place to run all the programs. We also want to put a fence around the community centre to keep the kids safe.





Leaves outside the circles: money story and support from external organisations

We need more funding, which is, more money. More funding and more money to tell our story or more money to run our programs. More money to keep Children's Ground around. We need to know where the money is going because that's the money story too. We need more money from the government. That's the leaves outside supporting us to do.

The needs for different communities, it is different. Some of us would like more bush trips, other communities need a [community] hall or a fence. It's just little things. We need support to fulfill this.

Services and networking, bimonthly meetings and that, it needs to be better. We need more of that, more networking. We need to get more out so it works out for us. These mob [local services] we want them to support us to do things. For community, for services, government and stakeholders, we need to know where all that is kept, information and feedback. No one comes back to us. Every stakeholder meeting, there is no feedback from anyone. They just come in take notes and take what we say and what we need in our community and they don't even come back and tell us. We want Children's Ground to be our mob for them to go to. Because Children's Ground is working with community. Children's Ground helps. It is an organisation within the community that branches out to the other stakeholders. We are talking and talking, but we need action now. We need these mob [local services] to listen to us and do action. We can talk about this for ages but no action happening. We don't hear from any stakeholders. Other services are not listening like how Children's Ground does.

Waves: the long journey

We want services and staff to come and stay for the long term, but then they come and leave. We need somebody to come for the long term, just stay with us. With the boys' group, for instance, that was going really good, we never had boys involved and the male staff from Children's Ground coming in was good. The boys loved that and then all of a sudden, he [the Children's Ground staff member] just went. Now that he is gone, they feel left out. They really really need a male role model here at Children's Ground to go and do things with them. The next staff interviews we are going to interrogate whether people are here for the money or fun or they are here for the long term.

So, because services come and go and Children's Ground staff come and go and that is creating a lot of frustration, growing frustration. So, what we need is more stability. We need stable staff. You can't just walk in and out just like that, you got to build a trust. We go off the feelings and kids got feelings too. We want to know if staff are going to be reliable. If they actually really wanting the job for real reasons, not for money but for helping community become stronger.

We need more stable organisations. Children's Ground provides that. Children's Ground is always here. They're stable. They're here with us for 25 years. Yeah, but with the people in the positions in Children's Ground, they can come and go but Children's Grounds is always here for us. We don't want the up and down, we need the stability. It always comes from, always will start from Children's Ground – the organisation that's getting us [First Nations people and communities] on the map, getting our words out there and this is the organisation who is riding this journey with us and trying to make it stable. And we need Children's Ground staff who want to come in for the long term – to stay.



4.2 Process evaluation findings and analysis

This section evaluates the extent to which the CG Approach has been implemented as intended from the WTA CEP phase in 2020 to 2021 through to transitioning into early-stage delivery from 2022 to 2024. It evaluates 'what' and 'how' services, supports and the system have been implemented in line with Children's Ground's ten practice principles (see Figure 8 further on), including the integrated services platform, cultural and western processes and standards within each principle.

The assumption underpinning the delivery of the CG Approach is that all ten principles must be implemented effectively to achieve sustained systems change and outcomes for children, families and whole communities over the course of a generation.

Therefore, critical to evaluating the CG Approach is not only what services are delivered, but also how they are delivered.

The process findings presented in this report are drawn from the collective experiences of families across the three distinct communities. While findings are reported at a regional level, the CG Approach was implemented across three communities, each with different governance arrangements, cultural structures, population characteristics, infrastructure, service environments and community priorities. These contextual differences influenced how the CG practice principles were experienced and enacted within each community.

The key process evaluation question is: ***Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended?*** In respect to:

> What was delivered across each area of the integrated service platform, within the context of the growth model and as compared with the full CG Approach?
>
> How was the CG Approach delivered in line with the ten practice principles?

Firstly, to respond to the evaluation question of 'What was delivered', Figure 7 outlines the status of delivery with Darwin communities across each area of Children's Ground's integrated service system as at the end of 2024 – as compared with the full CG Approach.

Secondly, to respond to the evaluation question of 'CG Approach delivery in line with the ten principles', (see Figure 8) findings are presented for each principle with evaluative judgements made based on the criteria outlined below, informed by data collected across the evaluation period.

On track and effective.
Principle reflected in delivery. Strong alignment with intent.

Not yet on-track, strengthening required.
Principle partially reflected in delivery. Moderate alignment.

Not on track.
Principle rarely reflected in delivery. Minimal alignment.

Some key community differences are included throughout this section to provide context for the regional level evaluation findings in respect to how each community's context shaped implementation. This is not to compare community progress with the CG Approach. It aims to identify ways in which local community environments and conditions influenced implementation, strategy and resource requirements.

What was delivered across each area of the integrated service platform, within the context of the growth model and as compared with the full CG Approach?

Figure 7 outlines the extent to which the CG Approach was delivered with Darwin communities by the end of this evaluation period (2024), compared with the intent of the full CG Approach.

Figure 7: CG Approach Darwin delivery, compared with the full CG Approach

	Full CG Approach	Delivery by end 2024
Learning & Wellbeing	• Formal learning equivalent 5 days per week (on-Country and centre-based in communities). • Extended after-hours hours informal learning (after-hours, weekends, school holidays). • Literacy/learning resource production. • Specialist educators in language, creative arts, music, physical education, multi-media, etc.	• Early Learning delivery in 2 communities, ranging from 2-3 per week. Began in 2021 as 'Act' within WTA, with delivery increasing in frequency over time. • Extended after-hours delivery in 3 communities, 2–3 days per week. Began in 2022 with one community, with delivery increasing in communities and in frequency over time including school holidays.
Health & Wellbeing	• Universal health promotion and support delivered. • Targeted individual and whole-of-family health promotion and support. • Health promotion and support includes: o Nutrition o Child and maternal health o Cultural health and wellbeing o Social/emotional wellbeing o Environmental health o Supported access to clinical health • Coordinated delivery in partnership with local services.	• Limited but consistent delivery of universal health promotion and support, integrated into formal and informal learning sessions in 3 communities. Began in July 2021. • Intensive COVID health promotion. • Limited delivery of targeted individual and family health promotion, with two communities, focused on nutrition, child and maternal health, supported access to clinical health. Began in July 2021 with Australian Government funding and philanthropic funding. • Family Support Services (FSS), intensive, individualised early intervention to prevent family engagement with the child protection system (NT Government-funded program). Began in 2022.
Economic Development & Wellbeing	• Local community First Nations employment. • Training and mentoring. Western and cultural. Professional and personal development. • Financial and consumer literacy promotion and support. • Enterprise opportunities and support.	• Local community employment. Began small in 2020 and slightly increased over time. • Dedicated funding for locally based workforce development and support began in 2022, with funding to engage young people in employment beginning in 2024. • Regular training and professional development opportunities for all staff • Leadership development opportunities, internally and externally.
Community Development & Wellbeing	• Intergenerational hub of learning, wellbeing and safety in each community. • Place-based delivery of learning, health, employment, governance and community and cultural development. • Weekly/fortnightly local First Nations governance for the region and each community. • Daily governance with children and families through delivery. • Community-led planning and reporting. • Community celebrations of family, culture and safety. • Community development activities and initiatives, based on community identified priorities.	• No functional community centres at beginning of delivery. • Now, refurbished community centres in two communities. One community remains without in-community infrastructure. • Majority of delivery is place-based in two communities increasing over time with infrastructure upgrades. Limited place-based delivery in one community due to inadequate infrastructure. • In 2023, WTA CEP focus broadened community governance and engagement. • Community-level governance built towards weekly/fortnightly consistency in three communities by end 2024. • Strengthened place-based capacity in three communities in late 2024, with local Community Lead[55] working alongside a dedicated Community Coordinator. • Regional governance occurs monthly with some consistency challenges. • Six-monthly reviews of community plans in three communities. • Community events/celebrations occurring at least quarterly in three communities.
Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing	• Elders' leadership. • First Nations Governance. • Culture, law, language and practice is promoted and privileged in all Children's Ground activities.	• Delivery of Learning on Country in three communities. Began as part of WTA CEP and increased to weekly over time. • First Nations language learning in early learning sessions. • Empowered and supported three communities to lead planning and decision-making and engage with key Elders to build cultural delivery and wellbeing over time in a complex cultural environment. • A focus on cultural maternal and child health, including Women's and Young Women's Groups. Began in 2022 in three communities and continued. • Cultural maternal and child health.
Local service coordination & partnerships	• Service partnerships that enable seamless access for children and families to culturally safe services and environments. • Integrated planning and delivery internally across the CG Approach and through partnership delivery across the local service systems.	• Positive and strengthening relationships with many local services. Began in 2021 with COVID immunisations and increased over time to health and other delivery. • Consistent delivery collaborations with some local services and programs, with a significant increase in 2024. • Ad hoc occasions of coordinated delivery with some local services. • In 2022, transitioned to lead organisation for the bi-monthly service stakeholder meetings in 2 communities – at the request of Chief Minister's Office.

55. A Community Lead is a community-based staff member. A Community Coordinator is a non-community-based position.

How was the CG Approach delivered in line with the ten practice principles?

This section evaluates how the CG Approach was delivered (activities, processes and standards) across Darwin communities, in line with Children's Ground's ten principles, articulated in Figure 8.

Each section (principle) includes:

- A brief summary of the principle and context.
- An outline of what is being evaluated within each principle (the intent of each principle).
- Evaluation data demonstrating the extent to which each element of the principle has or has not been implemented effectively with alignment to the intent of the principle. Note: The headings within each principle sub-section reflect the evaluative assessment (coloured green, orange, red) and statements that reflect overarching evaluation findings.
- A summary of findings.

An evaluation of 'what' has been delivered (the integrated service platform) is also included, particularly in the principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits'.

Figure 8: CG Approach ten practice principles

Child, family & community led
- Governance and leadership by First Nations people living in communities.
- Leading design, delivery, evaluation.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Innovation - combining old and new
- Combing 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.



Child, family and community-led

"It's all about the community, that's what it's all about. It's not about one person being the boss, it has to come from everybody. If it doesn't come from everybody, it's not going to work."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

The CG Approach is designed to empower First Nations people and communities experiencing generational service system racism, exclusion and injustice. Of the Children's Ground principles, child, family and community leadership is first and foremost, underpinning and enabling the integrity of every element of the CG Approach.

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.

Children's Ground recognises that in Aboriginal communities across urban and regional centres, such as the Darwin communities, shared decision-making can be challenged by the legacy of colonisation, which has disrupted traditional governance structures, kinship systems and cultural authority.

Within the CG Approach, the process of establishing and building First Nations governance and leadership is embedded from the outset, beginning during the WTA community engagement and planning phase.

Active First Nations governance includes a deliberate focus on understanding the history of oppression, attempted genocide and imposed structures that have deliberately denied the voices of First Nations people and the rights of people to exercise control over their lives.

In addition, it is recognising that there is an existing governance that all communities have, that relate to Elders, County and kinship. This all informs structures and systems to promote people's voice and decision making.

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. The First Nations Governance Group is leading regional governance of the CG Approach, with the voices of community members leading decision-making.
2. Each community leads and governs the CG Approach in and with their community through a local approved community plan.
3. Daily governance occurs with children and families (as 'service users').
4. Governance follows cultural governance protocols and processes determined by the community.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following assesses the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted each element of the principle of 'Child, family and community led'.

The evaluation assessment of progress in demonstrated in the heading colouring.

1. Regional First Nations governance is in place but requires strengthening.

First Nations regional governance began in 2020 during the WTA phase and continued into early-stage delivery.

From 2020 to 2024, 29 community members engaged in planning and governing the CG Approach for the Darwin region. Engagement in regional governance remained steady, with an average of 12 people engaging annually and representing each of the three communities.

A core group of First Nations community leaders/staff from each community have consistently engaged with regional governance and built a sense of shared ownership and responsibility over strategic and operational planning. There are three people, one from each community, who hold this governance most consistently.

"At the end of the day, we are all one mob, we are connected through marriage, family and also through culture."

First Nations community leaders, 2024

The frequency of regional governance meetings has varied over the years, averaging 15 annually with a low of seven in 2020 and a high of 21 in 2023.

Regional governance delivery and engagement have been impacted by a range of factors:

- Growth model resource limitations for extensive community engagement and local employment.
- Trialling different governance models with focus on place-based community governance.
- The cultural diversity across each community, requires time to establish shared governance and decision-making at scale.
- Two changes in the Top End Regional Director position throughout the evaluation period, meant new Directors had to take time to establish relationships with communities to build effective regional governance processes.

It is anticipated that regional governance will increase and strengthen as the CG Approach increases funding and delivery across Darwin communities.

2. Community governance is in place and effective but can be strengthened.

Before Children's Ground

Community governance occurring in two communities focused on housing only.

No community reported existing, consistent and strong community governance, planning and community informed service delivery.

Over five years, throughout the community engagement and early delivery years First Nations community governance was established in each community.

By the end of 2024, two communities have established strong community level governance supported by place-based infrastructure. One has strong local leadership but not broad community governance.

From 2020 to 2024, 56 community members engaged in community level governance. Table 4 shows the growth in community level governance over the first five years of WTA and early-stage delivery.

Table 4: First Nations governance delivery and engagement, by year

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of people	10	20	23	21	25
Number of meetings	17	17	35	43	46

Each community has developed and actively reviews their Community Plan annually, and most staff and family members interviewed felt that Children's Ground listens to and responds to community voices. However, ongoing and more extensive community engagement is required to increase consistent broader community governance and decision-making.

In late 2024, place-based leadership was strengthened with the introduction of dedicated Community Lead (community-based staff) and Community Coordinator roles (non-community positions, made up of both First Nations and non-First Nations staff). The Community Coordinator roles work alongside the Community Leads from each community to support and broaden engagement, to undertake community planning, delivery coordination, stakeholder engagement, WTA, employment support and administration.

Though introduced late in the evaluation period, all Community Leads and community-based staff reported a positive impact of the new model, particularly noting an impact on increasing child and family engagement, amplifying community voices and fostering a stronger team.

Each community began leading the CG Approach with different existing (or non-existing) governance structures and leadership arrangements. These differences shaped how community priorities were identified, who needed to be engaged, how decisions were made and the pathways through which community direction was provided.

In some communities, implementation could work through established governance organisations and recognised leadership structures. In others, decision-making occurred through more distributed family, household, kinship and cultural networks, requiring greater initial relationship-building to establish community governance and decision-making.

The presence of multiple and diverse cultural and language groups often required ongoing navigation and cultural diplomacy to support collective decision-making.

Across the communities, one governance arrangement did not represent stronger community leadership or ownership than another. Rather, irrespective of the structure, community governance was reported as effective when it was recognised and worked through locally defined governance, cultural authorities and relationships. In communities where governance structures were being established and emerging, supporting engagement and decision-making processes were a significant priority within implementation, and at times being the main focus.

In evaluation interviews, many First Nations staff and family members reported the importance of communities making key decisions and having their voice heard. Most people reported that Children's Ground listens to the voice of the community and reported positive feelings about having their voice heard, referring to feeling proud, respected, happy, grateful and responsible.

"I feel good. It's good to have that [community governance], that you're speaking up for the community and making the whole of the staff know that you lead and make decisions, you're able to make decisions. That's important."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

[How does community governance make you feel] "Responsible, that's what it makes us. It makes us feel responsible. But that's the thing, it has to come from everyone, not just one voice."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Communities with stronger existing governance structures, higher levels of community cohesion and participation stability were more likely to report implementation experiences associated with collective decision-making and community ownership.

A strong theme that emerged from evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members was seeing young people engage in community governance and employment. People talked about needing more training and support to engage young people in community governance and employment as the next generation of leadership.

"Yeah, we like to see them coming into governance, getting involved. We need more of that training and stuff."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"It'll be like, [community staff member] will be a good role model for the younger ones in the community for the future."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"I'm really impressed about my granddaughter working with you guys, she's doing the right thing."

45-50 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"...getting more young people involved. Getting them to do more work like in the community... build up like a cultural centre, like for young ones. And getting the older ones teaching the younger ones like cultural stuff."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Due to resource constraints to date, a small group of community leaders have been leading the CG Approach and community governance. Achieving broader community involvement in planning and leadership remains a key priority for each community.

Broader and more extensive community engagement across all areas of the CG Approach is a consistent theme reported by staff/family members throughout this evaluation report.



Local service perspectives on community governance

In evaluation interviews with local services, people shared their perspectives on Children's Ground's community governance approaches, including how it has informed their service/ program delivery.

"So they're [Children's Ground staff] working with the community members to achieve whatever it is that the community finds important, which I think is really good. They're not going in with their own agenda of what they want to achieve; it's like, what does the community want and need, and how can we work to improve that. So, I think that's a really good strength of Children's Ground."

"You guys do a really good job of engaging the community... like, making sure that their [community] feedback directly influences your programs. And then that, obviously, creates buy-in for young people when they actually feel like their voices are what's initiating the program delivery... You guys do a really good job of being community-led, and engaging based on the needs of the community. So, I commend you guys for that, because it has, what I perceive to be, a really positive influence on both the community and the program delivery."

Local service providers, 2024

3. Families are contributing to community planning and delivery through daily governance.

Before Children's Ground

No informal or daily governance reportedly occurring in any of the communities.

Evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members found that daily governance is occurring through place-based activities and in-community presence.

The active involvement of children, young people and families in shaping community planning and service delivery, occurs in informal meetings/discussions, during early learning, after-hours sessions and community events. This engagement is not captured quantitatively due to its informal and frequent nature.

"To make sure that you're making the right decisions and going back to the community and making sure that what you said and what you're trying to do is to make better. Making sure that the community agrees, and stuff like that. That you made the right decision."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024



Some staff/family members reported that informal conversations, rather than formal meetings, were a more effective way to capture the voices, perspectives and ideas of family members who don't engage with community governance meetings and planning sessions.

It was also reported that family members approach community-based and other staff to provide feedback, needs and ideas when the staff are in the community. This affirms the importance of place-based in-community delivery, which is reported further on.

A common theme from evaluation interviews was the need to increase family engagement in learning sessions to broaden engagement in community governance, starting where people are comfortable, which is often daily governance through delivery.

4. First Nations governance is effectively practiced in culturally appropriate ways.

Before Children's Ground

Two communities reported cultural governance protocols in place.

Most First Nations staff and families interviewed reported that governance follows cultural protocols, especially during Sorry Business and decision-making processes guided by cultural authority and relationships.

The existence and strength of cultural kinship systems and knowledge of cultural governance protocols varied across communities.

In the communities where people are living on their traditional lands, the cultural authority is led by the Traditional Owners, and community-level governance extends to community residents. The existing strong kinship networks and cultural authority structures provided established foundations for leadership and governance.

In communities where people are living off their traditional lands, where the impacts of colonisation and displacement had disrupted these structures, greater initial relationship building was required across family groups to enable collective governance approaches. In these communities, cultural and community authority has been established and are recognised locally.

Governance processes are guided by shared principles across Nations, such as Elders' authority, community recognition, history and leadership. Each community continues to follow its own established governance structures, which were in place prior to, and in some cases strengthened through Children's Ground.

Summary

Community empowerment and leadership is on-track and being implemented effectively, within the context of the growth model.

Community members are actively engaged in local decision-making, with each having a Community Plan that is used and reviewed regularly. Families are also engaging in planning through daily governance in learning delivery.

There is a small but strong group of core community-based staff members actively engaged in regional governance. This has been effective in guiding the direction of the CG Approach for the Darwin region. However, local governance has not been implemented with the broad regular engagement as intended.

Increasing the breadth of engagement in both community and regional level governance remains a high priority, however, this is directly impacted by adequate resourcing.

Even within a high colonised context, First Nations community leaders are ensuring governance is following cultural protocols and processes, as determined and navigated by each community.

Start Early

"Working with the kids, the zero to five. Just help supporting families. Letting them know that they're welcome to come in and work with the kids as well. You know, there's no shame – they have a right to come in and work too, with the kids... That makes the kids happy to see a parent coming in working."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

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. Consistent with international evidence about the impact of preventative approaches, this principle focuses on children having the best start in life and sustained opportunities throughout childhood. [56] [57] [58]

The aim is to create the conditions for children to thrive by focusing on early childhood development and early intervention with children and their families, in the context of their community.

If successful, this focus will decrease and prevent health issues that can become chronic and debilitating, and reduce the likelihood of child removal, incarceration, school exclusion, family violence, homelessness and economic hardship by addressing the underlying social determinants early in life. [59] [60] [61] [62]

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Children's Ground is working with children pre-birth to five years old, and their family through weekly delivery of early learning and health promotion sessions.
2. Early intervention is being achieved through internal service integration and external local service collaboration.



56. OECD. (2021). *A strong start for every child*. OECD Publishing.
57. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Australia's children* (Cat. no. CWS 69). Australian Government.
58. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2016). *Applying the science of child development in child welfare systems.*
59. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Australia's children* (Cat. no. CWS 69). Australian Government.
60. Moore, T. G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2021). *The first thousand days: An evidence paper*. Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.
61. Shonkoff, J. P., Slopen, N., & Williams, D. R. (2021). Early childhood adversity, toxic stress, and the impacts of racism on the foundations of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 42, 115–134.
62. OECD. (2021). *A strong start for every child*. OECD Publishing.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following assesses the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted each element of the principle of 'Start Early'.

1. Young children (and their families) are actively engaged in early learning and health promotion from their earliest years.

Before Children's Ground

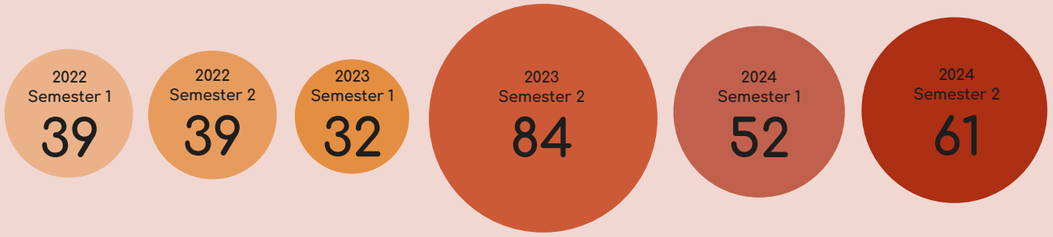
In one community, a playgroup was being delivered approx. one to two days per week.

Another community reported some engagement with early learning outside of their community.

As part of the WTA CEP phase, from 2020 to 2021, 192 early learning sessions were delivered. These began to engage young children and their family in early years learning and were an opportunity to engage families in WTA discussions and planning.

During early-stage delivery, from 2022 to 2024, 307 early learning sessions were delivered. Figure 9 shows early learning delivery by semester across these years.

Figure 9: Early years learning delivery, by semester and year



Across each semester and year of early-stage implementation there were increases and decreases in delivery. This is consistent with the delivery interruptions noted previously, with COVID-19 impacting in 2022 and the need for all communities to prioritise community engagement at times impacting throughout. This was also impacted by one community having very few young children and formally returning to the WTA phase in 2023 and subsequently shifting priorities to after-hours delivery with young people over six years of age.

All children engaged in early learning also participated in integrated health promotion.

From 2022 to 2024, 117 children aged 0–5 years engaged with Children's Ground's learning and health promotion, integrated within early years learning, after-hours learning and through targeted health delivery outside of learning environments. Within this engagement, 35 children (0–3 years) and 106 family members (18+ years) actively engaged in targeted maternal and child health promotion and support.

First Nations staff and family members reported that early learning sessions are going well, although some noted the need to increase and broaden the engagement to children from all family groups.

> "When we go somewhere [on early learning sessions] we also do healthy routine, like little ones... Yeah, to keep themselves clean and stuff."
>
> 15-20 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "They're learning our kids to eat the right food... Yeah, they like eating the vegetables when they teach them to do salad or stuff. They want to come and do it at home."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "Children's Ground was working with her, and her little family, because she had a toddler and she's had another baby. They'd pick her up on her pay day and take her out... and she got to do a bit of [food] shopping there."
>
> 45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

2. Opportunities for early intervention are being delivered but require more consistency, deliberate efforts and increased resourcing.

Opportunities for early intervention in health occurred during the period through integrating universal health promotion in early years and after-hours learning. This provided regular entry points for child and family early intervention, with targeted follow-up as needed.

In addition to early years learning and maternal and child health promotion, Children's Ground's preventative and early intervention health promotion includes working with young people to promote positive intimate partner relationships and sexual health. This began with engaging young women.

From 2022 to 2024, 23 young girls/women aged 9-17 years participated in Young Women's Groups, led by their mothers, grandmothers, aunties and Children's Ground's female health practitioner.

Engagement with young men in health promotion did not occur during the period due to resource limitations. Engaging men and young men have been reported as a priority by community staff and family members.

Children's Ground is a deliverer of the NT Government's Family Support Services (FSS) program, which funds the provision of intensive, individualised early intervention support to reduce and prevent family engagement with the child protection system. Beginning in 2022, the FSS team has worked with 39 family members and their children, including young people and adults from the age of 16 years and upwards.

In evaluation interviews, staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) reported that there is the potential and need to improve integration of the FSS team with other CG Approach service areas, particularly learning and health promotion.

Most local services interviewed reported that collaboration with Children's Ground helped extend their reach and improve early intervention, with 80% (seven out of nine services) reporting that these partnerships led to earlier identification of child and family needs. This represents only a small number of local services (as outlined in method in Section 2.2).

Children's Ground's support for families to access local health services outside of their community has contributed to increased access to and engagement in early intervention services and supports. Furthermore, Children's Ground's collaboration with local services also led to early intervention opportunities.

Establishing new service partnerships and increasing collaboration with existing services will be important to ensure more consistent and deliberate efforts for early intervention.

See principle 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' further on for more detailed evaluation of integrated service delivery internally and externally.



Summary

This principle has been implemented effectively within the resource limitation of the growth model. Early years learning with integrated health promotion, MCH and young women's groups have been the key services areas that support early intervention, however increasing consistency in delivery remains a priority.

There is evidence that children are actively engaged in early learning and health promotion alongside their family members. However, the extent to which Children's Ground has been able to engage young men in health promotion and prevention has been limited due to lack of available resources.

The Family Support Services team have contributed to providing early intervention support with a small number of families. However further work is required internally to improve integration with the broader CG Approach.

Collaborations with local services, some of whom had existing relationships with communities before Children's Ground, has also contributed to opportunities for early intervention. However, there is a need to continue building on relationships with local services to increase opportunities for early intervention.

A critical mass (work with everyone)

"We need to do more engagement with the families. Not only the children, but the families of the children, like the grandfather, grandmother, mummy, daddy, whatever. Yeah, we need to engage more with the families".

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

The CG Approach is designed as a whole-of-community approach to achieve sustained population level change over time.

This principle focuses on inclusivity, working with everyone and ensuring that children and families do not fall through gaps in service systems. It also focuses on always working with children in the context of their families and communities, which is in line with cultural and western evidence that demonstrates that children thrive when their families and communities are supported to provide nurturing environments. [63] [64]

To achieve community level impact, the CG Approach aims to engage a critical mass of at least 75% of children aged 0–8 years and their families.

The underlying hypothesis is that when most children and families in a community experience high-quality opportunities in education, health, employment, governance and empowerment from birth, this will drive generational change as those children grow to become the next generation of caregivers.[65] [66] [67] [68] [69]

This principle is central to the Children's Ground's strategy of achieving sustained community-level change over time.

In the full CG Approach, achieving critical mass is expected within the first few years of delivery. However, within the growth model, this is not expected until adequate resourcing is in place.

See Appendix 4 for information about community population mapping processes and challenges.

The following outlines the main element of this principle that has been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Children's Ground works with a critical mass of children and families (defined as at least 75% of the population) to ensure lifelong physical, emotional, cultural, economical and social wellbeing for people of all ages over the long-term.

63. Moore, T. (2024). Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2
64. Moore, T., McDonald, M., McHugh-Dillon, H., & West, S. (2016). *Community engagement: A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families* (CFCA Paper No. 39). Australian Institute of Family Studies.
65. OECD. (2021). *A strong start for every Indigenous child*. OECD Publishing.
66. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). Closing the Gap targets: Key findings and implications – Children thriving. Australian Government.
67. Merculief, A., Tsethlikai, M., & Muniz, F. (2024). Applying an Indigenous connectedness framework to examine environmental risk and protective factors for urban American Indian children's executive function development. *Behavioral Sciences, 14*(12), Article 1202. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14121202
68. Silburn, S. R., 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). Northern Territory Government.
69. Greenwood, M., de Leeuw, S., & Fraser, T. (2007). *Aboriginal children and early childhood development and care.* National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following assesses the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted each element of the principle of 'A critical mass'.

1. Engagement of a critical mass has not been achieved during early-stage delivery.

Before Children's Ground

There were no family reports or evidence of services/programs seeking to work with the whole community.

It was not expected that within the growth model that the resources would enable engagement of a critical mass of children and their families.

In 2024 comprehensive population mapping was undertaken with First Nations staff from each community to the extent that there is a high degree of confidence in the population data.

Based on this data, in 2024 Children's Ground engaged with approximately 60% of children aged 0–8 years and 41% of adults (18+ years) across all Children's Ground communities. Overall, 51% of community members of all ages participated in Children's Ground activities at least once during the year. While this demonstrates broad engagement of children and families, this does not represent regular engagement.

Consistent engagement was primarily among the families of community members employed by Children's Ground. This demonstrates the need to strengthen broader community engagement and participation, as well as increase resources for community-based employment across family groups.

As noted throughout this report, almost all community staff/family members interviewed reported the need to continue increasing engagement of children, young people and family members.

Communities experiencing higher population mobility, lower levels of community participation or limited infrastructure were more likely to identify challenges associated with achieving critical mass and sustaining engagement and integrating supports across different areas of work.

One challenge and barrier to broader engagement is that a significant amount of Children's Ground funding is based on service/program delivery, not community engagement which is required to support access to and participation with services. With delivery targets and key performance indicators attached to many significant funding grants, adequate resources to prioritise broad community engagement in Darwin communities have not been available.

"And I want to get more community engagement. I want to get more community to come work alongside me...
We need more community meetings. Like community gatherings... do up a community meeting, just bring the community together."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Maybe if we can go around asking and maybe sharing our stories with them, where we ask them to come over. Maybe if we make a barbeque."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Summary

There is evidence that Children's Ground has engaged with approximately half of the population across the three communities. However, this does not represent regular engagement.

To make further progress towards engaging a critical mass of children and their families, increased resourcing is required to enable more extensive community engagement strategies, increase consistency in presence and delivery in communities and increase community-based employment.

This principle has not been implemented to the extent intended. However, progress has been made in refining and embedding community population mapping processes.

In-community (place-based)

"[before Children's Ground] "There was nothing in here... this [community centre] was closed. This was sitting here for ten years or so."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

The principle of 'In-community (place-based)' is central to the CG Approach. Embedding services, supports, staff and opportunities within communities is critical for improving outcomes in education, health, employment, governance and social participation as a part of everyday community life.[70] [71] [72]

The CG Approach replaces traditional visiting and 'delivery to' service models that require individuals to navigate multiple barriers to access support, delivering in-community with, rather than to people.

The CG Approach also focuses on promoting cultural identity, leadership and the celebration of community life as a norm. The aim is to transform historically under-resourced and excluded communities into well-supported environments where opportunity, inclusion and empowerment are embedded.



Over time, this strengthens the health, educational, social, cultural and economic capital of families and of whole communities.[73] [74] [75]

Central to this approach are intergenerational community centres, owned and run by the community. These centres serve as places of safety for children and families, and as hubs for governance, learning and celebration. They enable integrated service delivery, local employment and services based in community to engage deliberately and incidentally with people in their community, such as clinical and allied health services, financial literacy, training, etc.

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Each community has an intergenerational hub of safety, learning, wellbeing, governance and employment in their community, run by their families.
2. All delivery is place-based, delivered where children and families live.
3. Building upon inclusion, safety and the social, cultural and economic capital of the whole community.

70. Moore, T. (2024). *Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice*. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2
71. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Social determinants and Indigenous health*. https://www.aihw.gov.au
72. OECD. (2020). *A territorial approach to the Sustainable Development Goals: Synthesis report*. OECD Publishing.
73. Bond, C., & Brady, K. (2013). Locating Indigenous Australia within community development practice: Clients, consumers or change makers? *New Community Quarterly, 11*(3), 33–39.
74. Jordan, K., Markham, F., & Altman, J. C. (2020). *Linking Indigenous communities with regional development: Australia overview*. Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.
75. Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). (2016). *What works in effective Indigenous community-managed programs and organisations*. Australian Government.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following assesses the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted each element of the principle of 'In-community'.

1. Community infrastructure increased, enabling some place-based delivery.

Before Children's Ground

Two communities had existing, but dilapidated and unused community centres. One community had no community infrastructure.

In 2020, during the initial WTA CEP phase, community infrastructure was raised as a key priority by all three Darwin communities.

In 2021-22, staff supported community leaders to advocate for access to their centres, with Children's Ground funding critical maintenance, power and renovations of the existing centres in two communities to make them operational.

Under the guidance of community leaders, the following progress was made towards enabling in-community place-based delivery:

- **Community 1:** An existing community centre and significantly damaged demountable office had been closed for several years due to maintenance issues. Children's Ground supported basic upgrades and restoration of power, enabling the reopening of the centre. Over two years resources were secured to renovate demountable buildings for office and storage use. This created a base for local and visiting staff.
- **Community 2:** An existing community centre had been inaccessible and without power for several years. Children's Ground negotiated access over a period of time and then supported advocacy efforts by community leaders to restore power. The centre was subsequently used for service delivery and meetings, enabling staff to work from the community. A local leader employed by Children's Ground facilitated collaboration with another employment support provider to renovate an adjoining demountable.
- **Community 3:** No infrastructure was available. Children's Ground supported multiple funding applications led by community leaders to establish a community centre over the years; however, all applications were unsuccessful.

By 2024, two communities had functional community centres with office and meeting spaces. However, these are not considered high-quality or entirely fit-for-purpose. One community remains without a community hub for governance, learning and community gatherings.

"It's going better I think, because when Children's Ground wasn't working here, like this office wasn't here. It had a big hole, it wasn't even working. Then when Children's Ground came in, they start helping us. Like, getting everything together. The kitchen, they were helping us with that as well. They bought a fridge."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Increasing and improving community infrastructure remains a key priority for each community.



"Yeah, we've got this [office container], but we want it to be 100 per cent better. I want maybe another side building, another office, I want a men's side shed ... Even if no-one comes ... we're sitting here ... we're present in community, you know ... they know they can come to ask for anything."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

The availability and suitability of community infrastructure affected the timing, regularity, type and range of implementation and delivery. Access to suitable facilities enabled a visible and consistent place-based presence and created opportunities for community gatherings, informal and incidental engagement and service coordination.

Where dedicated facilities were achieved in communities, it contributed to establishing reliable and safe spaces for engagement, with access to basic amenities that could support a broad range of delivery. Where dedicated facilities or a community hub were not available, implementation relied heavily on shared spaces, outdoor locations and different approaches to engagement. This increased the resources required to build relationships, maintain a consistent presence and coordinate delivery.

Infrastructure therefore functioned as an enabling condition for place-based delivery.

2. In-community delivery was established in two communities to a degree, enabled by community infrastructure.

From 2022 to 2024, in-community place-based delivery was achieved to a degree. In two communities, place-based delivery was enabled by the functional community centres. Limited staffing and no in-community office areas impacted community engagement and embedding place-based delivery.

While there was a consistent presence in communities, staff were not permanently based in communities. The community without any infrastructure was significantly impacted.

In 2022, COVID-19 was a barrier to place-based delivery in all three communities.

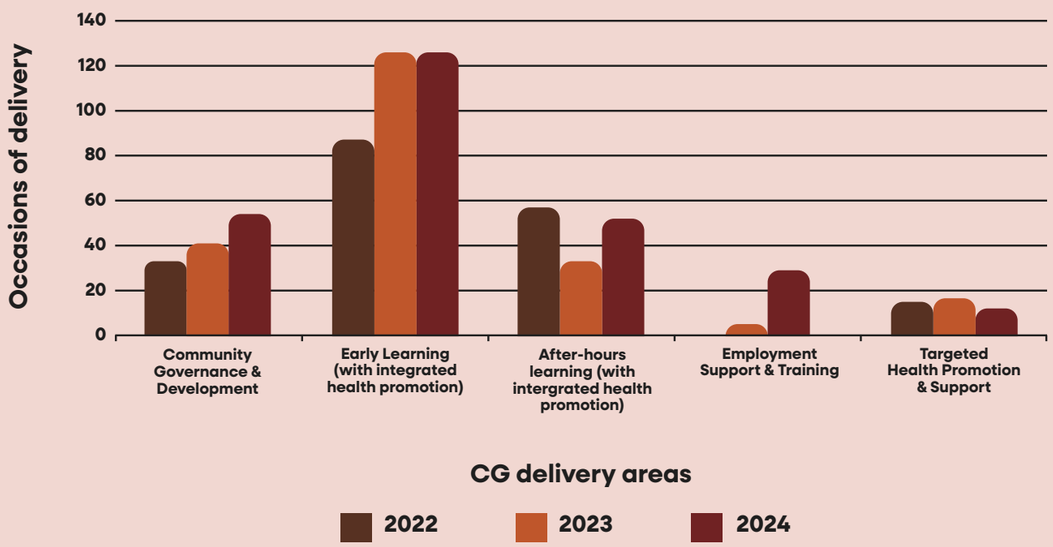
Before Children's Ground

Two communities reported a range of services coming into their community to deliver early learning, after-hours programs, health services, financial literacy, etc. However, these were reportedly one-off or inconsistent.

By 2024, place-based delivery in two communities was able to become a primary operational focus, enabled by more functioning community centres, some in-community office space in one community and an increase in staff resources.

Graph 2 shows the amount of in-community place-based delivery achieved in key areas of the CG Approach from 2022 to 2024. Place-based delivery increased and decreased across each year of delivery, impacted by COVID-19, Sorry Business and in one community without any infrastructure weather conditions also impacted in-community delivery.

Graph 2: Occasions of in-community place-based delivery, by year and delivery area



Over the period, in-community delivery increased in almost all CG Approach delivery areas, particularly in 2023 to 2024 when community centre infrastructure had been refurbished in two communities. However, place-based delivery continued to be impacted by community infrastructure and staffing resources.

In the full CG Approach, an integrated team of learning, health and community development delivery staff are attached to and based in each community, enabling the place-based model to provide consistent activities and staff present every day.

Therefore, service delivery largely remained a 'service to' model, with staff operating from a central hub in Darwin and visiting communities for delivery and governance.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and families reported that while they felt Children's Ground is achieving place-based delivery, further progress is needed to have Children's Ground delivery and opportunities consistently in community.

Community staff and family members reported that increased place-based delivery improved community infrastructure, increased local employment and resulted in more Children's Ground staff based in communities.

3. Early foundations of inclusion, and social, cultural and economic capital are being led by community leaders.

Before Children's Ground

One community reported some community events occurring on a few occasions.

No services were focused on building the social, cultural and economic capital within communities.

Early foundations for inclusion, and the development of social, cultural and economic capital are being established, led by community leaders. Progress is emerging.

Local governance and intergenerational centres owned and led by communities are essential to fostering inclusion, safety, and social, cultural and economic capital across the whole community over time. Existing community centres in two communities are only in the early stages of progress towards active and fit-for-purpose intergenerational spaces that can enable full place-based delivery.

Staff and families reported that the introduction of the Community Coordinator roles in late 2024 started to strengthen place-based delivery, particularly in achieving a more regular presence of Children's Ground staff in communities, providing families with a more consistent point of contact. This has reportedly increased accessibility, trust and inclusion with families.

Evaluation findings highlight the need for increased community participation in governance, service delivery and employment to further build social, cultural and economic capital. Key enablers include improving infrastructure, expanding local employment and having a greater number of Children's Ground staff based within communities.





Summary

In-community place-based delivery occurred in all three communities, and in two communities this was enabled by existing community centre infrastructure, when it became accessible.

Community infrastructure improvements and access were a key focus during the Walk, Talk & Act phase and into early-stage delivery of the CG Approach.

Children's Ground started transitioning from a service to communities to a service in and with communities. However, progress has been slow, limited by growth model resource constraints.

Community members reported valuing in-community delivery and reported the need for increased place-based delivery and improved infrastructure to support the growth.

Significant growth and associated resources are required to achieve inclusive and socially, culturally and economically strong communities over time.

Deliver the whole, not the bits

"That's [this principle] doing good. Because I think last month we had … from Danila Dilba came in … doing health checks with kids and adults … and we have I think [a Children's Ground staff member] working with, I think optometrist for eyeglasses and that. Yeah, to get them to come in and check everybody's eyes."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Addressing the educational, health, social and economic factors and structures that contribute to extreme poverty, inequity and intergenerational disadvantage within communities is critical to achieving lasting positive outcomes.[76] [77] [78]

The principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' supports a shift from single issue service responses to a comprehensive, integrated system (the CG Approach).

The CG Approach responds to the key intersecting drivers that impact a child's life, including the education, health, wellbeing, economic, social and cultural life through an intergenerational context.

Within this section, the principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' – including the integrated service platform – are being evaluated.

The CG Approach has five integrated service areas: Learning & Wellbeing; Family Health & Wellbeing; Community Development & Wellbeing; Economic Development & Wellbeing; Cultural & Creative Development & Wellbeing. This defines what is delivered on the ground in each community. It is the most visible part of the CG Approach (i.e. daily services and activities). This includes what is delivered by Children's Ground staff as well as collaborations and partnerships with local services to achieve an integrated and seamless service/support experience for children and families.

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle and the integrated service platform that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. The service platform is implemented as a holistic and integrated suite of services, supports and opportunities.
2. Collaboration occurs between Children's Ground and other local services.
3. Children and families are at the centre of all delivery, with staff responding to individual and family needs and priorities.
4. Deliver culturally centred western and cultural services, supports and access.
5. Reduce service and system access barriers for children and families.

Note: 'Deliver culturally centred western and cultural services, supports and access' is reported on in the principle of 'Innovation – Combine old and new'.

76. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). Social determinants and Indigenous health. https://www.aihw.gov.au
77. Carson, B., Dunbar, T., Chenhall, R., & Bailie, R. (2007). *Social determinants of Indigenous health*. Allen & Unwin.
78. Walter, M., & Andersen, C. (2013). *Indigenous statistics: A quantitative research methodology*. Routledge.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following information evaluates the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted the principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' and implemented the integrated service platform.

1. Internal integrated service delivery is occurring to a degree but requires increased resources to deliver the integrated platform as intended.

During this evaluation period, the integrated service platform was established on a small scale in all three communities, with a focus on early years learning, local employment (limited by resources), local governance, navigating and planning for cultural development within the Darwin context, community development (infrastructure focus) and health promotion. Delivery and integration within each of these areas increased slightly throughout early-stage delivery from 2022 to 2024.

The evaluation found that there was integration across service delivery, however the degree of implementation was limited and varied within each of the platform areas and communities.

Limited and short-term program-based funding resulted in increases and decreases in service delivery over the period. For example, there was high engagement in maternal and child health when dedicated resources were secured for a period. Similarly, 12 months of enterprise development funding enabled planning, however, limited ongoing funding prevented ongoing development of enterprises.

Furthermore, funding rarely contributes resources to community engagement which is critical to building relationships and trust with communities to support active engagement with services and programs. Despite funding challenges, small-scale integrated delivery was achieved, but not at the scale intended and required for long term impact.

The number of people engaged in each service area is presented in other places throughout this report. This section focuses on internal integration of service areas across the CG Approach.

From 2022 to 2024, on 190 recorded occasions, Children's Ground staff worked together to respond to and support the needs of children and families.



The following integration has occurred across the CG Approach.

Integrated planning with community driven priorities:

Learning and Family Health teams undertake joint community planning, guided by local leadership and community-defined priorities which supports coordinated responses to community needs.

Integrated health promotion:

Health promotion is integrated into all activities, creating opportunities for children and families to engage in nutrition, healthy routines, social/emotional wellbeing, maternal and child health, bush food and medicines, physical activity, health checks, etc. alongside learning sessions or community events.

Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) and safety:

Underpins all delivery, including learning, health, employment, community governance and place-based delivery. Enabled and supported by SEWB practitioners who work across all areas of delivery with families and staff.

Culture is beginning to be embedded across all delivery areas.

Cultural learning is integrated into early learning sessions and after-hours activities. Cultural health delivery is integrated into some key areas, including health promotion, nutrition, maternal and child health, etc. Cultural protocols are embedded within governance and service delivery. Each of these are enabled by community-based employment.

Integrated workforce and systems:

Community-based First Nations staff are employed across learning, health and community engagement and development roles, strengthening engagement and coordinated delivery, enabling cultural safety and building local workforce capability.

In evaluation interviews, families and First Nations and non-First Nations staff spoke positively about the integration of learning and health promotion within early years sessions. However, several delivery staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) reported that internal collaboration across key service areas requires improvement. This was impacted by staffing recruitment and retention challenges in key management and delivery roles throughout the evaluation period. Staff highlighted that the introduction of Community Coordinator roles in late 2024 contributed to stronger team integration and improved service coordination.

Some family members not employed with Children's Ground had low awareness of services beyond early learning and after-hours sessions. This suggests that the broader scope of the CG Approach and its integrated delivery model is not yet widely known. This is consistent with what has been reported about limited capacity for broad and consistent community engagement throughout this evaluation.

In evaluation interviews, local services actively engaged with Children's Ground's delivery were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *'Children's Ground supports families in all parts of their life that impact on children's learning, health and wellbeing, employment'*. The majority of services (6 out of 9) agreed. Three services responded, 'Don't know'.

2. Collaborations with local services are being established and strengthening.

Before Children's Ground

No communities reported having supported and coordinated access to services and supports.

There has been good progress in building strong and effective collaborations with local services during the evaluation period.

Each community began implementing the CG Approach with different levels of access to local services (services external to Children's Ground) and differing histories with service delivery. These conditions shaped implementation in relation to opportunities for collaboration, referral pathways and coordinated support with Children's Ground.

Where visiting local services and relationships with communities were already present, Children's Ground focused on partnerships, collaboration and coordination, and supporting services to respond to community priorities. Where services were limited or inconsistent, emphasis was also placed on connecting families to services, supporting service navigation, increasing access to services in communities and direct delivery by Children's Ground.

As a result, similar community goals often included different implementation strategies.

From 2022 to 2024, on 130 occasions, Children's Ground staff have coordinated service delivery with other local services to respond to and support the needs of children and families.

This coordination typically involved practical actions such as arranging and accompanying (as requested) families to health appointments, providing transport, health literacy and understanding, and supporting families to follow through on referrals. It also included delivering joint early years health sessions with other services in the communities and facilitating communication between providers and community members.

These efforts have seen Children's Ground increase access to and engagement in local services by bringing together, facilitating community engagement, connecting and coordinating delivery between local services in ways that respond to the needs and priorities of children and families in their community.

Children's Ground senior management observed that the strong service sector in Darwin and openness to collaboration was a positive feature of a more urbanised context.

Children's Ground's relationships with some services began developing during the WTA phase and strengthened during early-stage delivery. See Box 3 for examples of collaborations between Children's Ground and local services.

Through new and strengthened relationships with local services and increased internal funding resources, multiple and diverse opportunities for collaboration emerged throughout early-stage delivery of the CG Approach.

Children's Ground's increased place-based delivery across 2022 and 2023 saw the CG Approach became a reliable and consistent in-community offering. This contributed to Children's Ground being asked by the NT Government's Chief Minister's Office to take over facilitation of existing bi-monthly stakeholder meetings, working closely with their Community Coordinators to build local service coordination and collaboration. These forums have been instrumental in placing communities at the centre of the service system, with each community identifying their service/program needs and local services coming together to report to communities on their delivery and collaboration.

> "I'm glad that Children's Ground came in because now it's working perfectly and now getting meetings up and running with Children's Ground support."
>
> 50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "[Before Children's Ground started] Nothing worked because the communication was poor with other stakeholders. And with Children's Ground, it's open, it's clear."
>
> 45-50 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Many First Nations staff/family members reported benefiting from Children's Ground's collaboration with external health services; particularly Children's Ground's role in facilitating visits from Danila Dilba Health Service (a local Aboriginal health service). This occurred on some occasions during 2023-24 but was not consistent or ongoing. The list below are some examples of this coordinated health delivery:

- Coordinated clinic visits in communities to undertake health checks, immunisations, hearing tests. Children's Ground staff engaged with families to engage with the in-community clinical health sessions and delivered early learning at the same time, which engaged children and families while waiting their turn with the health staff.
- Coordinate vaccination drives and other outreach drives by informing people and supporting participation.
- Coordinated health promotion and follow ups with community members.

These collaborations were reportedly highly valued by communities before they ceased. There is a strong desire amongst community members for these visits to resume. This is reported on further in Section 4.2 and 4.3, in child and family health outcomes.

Box 3: Example collaborations with local services and organisations

- **Danila Dilba:** In-community delivery of child immunisations, health checks and targeted health support.
- **NT Hearing:** In-community hearing checks.
- **Deadly Vision:** In-community eye checks.
- **Save the Children:** Coordinated delivery of early years programs in one community.
- **Local primary schools:** School engagement, transport, on-Country learning, etc.
- **Hoops 4 Health:** Partnership delivery of after-hours basketball programs.
- **PaRBA:** Partnership delivery of after-hours basketball programs.
- **AFL NT:** In-community after-hours footy training with children.
- **Boxfit:** In-community after-hours boxing training with children.
- **Ironbark:** Building a community vegetable garden and setting up a shared office space in a community.
- **Amity Community Services:** Nutrition delivery in early learning, engaged in women's groups, joint service network meetings, etc.

"We had Danila Dilba coming in... once a month on Mondays, but that's stopped. So, we'd like to see them back again."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Collaborations with other local services and organisations increased and strengthened in 2024 as Children's Ground secured funding to deliver after-hours activities with children and young people. This included organisations such as Hoops 4 Health, AFL NT and Boxfit (see Box 3 for other local organisations). The activities delivered in partnership with local organisations aligned with each community's priorities from the Community Plan and were delivered in partnership with local organisations.

Whilst only introduced in late 2024, interviews with community members and delivery staff highlighted the positive impact of Children's Ground introducing the Community Coordinator and Community Lead roles on enhancing internal capacity to engage with external stakeholders and strengthen partnerships.

In evaluation interviews with local services, the majority (eight out of nine) of local services agreed that Children's Ground actively fosters collaboration, enabled by strong staff relationships, shared values and support from their leadership. A few services reported that Children's Ground's consistency within the communities supports and enables collaborations.

"I think the strength is that they [Children's Ground] are willing to collaborate with other organisations and work closely with other organisations, definitely."

"Just because of the trust, commonality, the comfort that's built from consistency as well. Probably just always showing up, like on the day, the time. It just builds that into the routine that the kids know."

Local service providers, 2024

Most (six out of nine) local services interviewed reported having worked with Children's Ground for over a year, with some partnerships in place for up to four years. While six out of nine services noted that their collaboration with Children's Ground had strengthened over time, two reported no change and one noted a decline. This indicates an opportunity for improving collaboration and consistent engagement with some service partners.

Some local service stakeholders reported challenges in collaborating with Children's Ground and how service collaborations could be improved. Most services wanted to receive more information and communication about Children's Ground's daily operations around which collaboration can occur. A few people wanted more clarity about the roles and responsibilities of Children's Ground staff as points of contact for collaboration. Some services wanted Children's Ground to be more proactive in introducing new staff to the service stakeholders.

"I think that at both ends it's communication and just being really open and transparent."

"Previously we had a very good relationship, very good communication for staff. The staff, when we first started, knew very well what our role was and where we stood within the community. And then, as time went on, I think staff just made up their own idea of what we would do and had their own expectations of us, and when they weren't fulfilled, there was disappointment, which made it really tricky, and we had to just be really clear about where we stand... I think just communication is the biggest thing, for me. I think everything else, the service delivery and everything is excellent. I think just the communication."

"I've reached out a couple of times to try and sort of work through what more collaborative opportunities could look like. So, I guess it's just clearly identifying who's responsible for what, within your team, and who their point of contact needs to be for each kind of outlet or new project, or what that kind of looks like. That's probably the only feedback that I would give in that space."

"I guess the challenge is communication, turnover of staff and formulating an agreement so we're all on the same page and we work, listen to each other and how can we best do this."

Local service providers, 2024

Key learnings from service collaborations have been to ensure that clear communication of roles and responsibilities are outlined between the collaborating organisations, including developing a shared understanding of how each organisation operates and works with children and families. This could provide a platform for establishing collaborations with each organisation's systems and processes, reducing the reliance on collaborations being driven by relationships and the good will of a few practitioners from each organisation.

Evidence presented demonstrates that the CG Approach has contributed to addressing service coordination and collaboration gaps, while simultaneously supporting the effectiveness of other providers to engage with children and families in their communities. Through partnerships and integrated delivery, Children's Ground has supported existing services to extend their reach and work with Children's Ground to build the beginning of a more seamless and responsive support system for children and families. Increased and sustained local service collaborations have the potential to amplify outcomes across the broader service ecosystem.





3. Actively engaged children and families are at the centre of delivery, however individualised planning can be improved.



Before Children's Ground

No communities reported working with services who responded to their needs and priorities.

Reportedly, all services came into the community with what they had to offer.

"Well, there's been a lack of communication with stakeholders, they don't seem to listen. That's what I'm saying, the communication."
45-50 years, male, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Within the growth model resources, Children's Ground is on track with children and families being at the centre of delivery. Although this has not been implemented to the extent possible and intended within the full CG Approach.

Children's Ground's delivery partnerships with local services and facilitation of bi-monthly stakeholder meetings that ensure services are responding to each community's plan are approaches that have contributed to coordinated service delivery that places children, families and communities at its centre. On these occasions, this has resulted in Children's Ground and local services responding to and supporting the needs and priorities of children and families in their communities, rather than delivery being based on service needs, priorities and locations.

Children's Ground's delivery staff (First Nations and non-First Nations) reported that while health support is often relational and tailored to individual needs, collaboration between learning and health teams could be improved by co-developing individualised child health and learning plans and actively involving parents/carers in setting and monitoring goals for their children's learning, health and wellbeing.

Improvements will be achieved through increased staffing capacity, communication and planning and regular staff training in the CG Approach to reinforce that it is not a suite of activities, but rather integrated delivery that responds to individual and whole of family and community needs and priorities. This will support improved quality and integrity of child and family-centred delivery.

5. Service access barriers have been reduced for actively engaged children and families.

Reducing service and system access barriers for children and families is viewed through a holistic lens, seeking to address access barriers to health services, education engagement, culture, employment (and other economic opportunities) as well as leadership and empowerment pathways.

Flexibility and responsiveness are deliberate and embedded in the design of CG Approach delivery. The ability to respond to most individual and family needs on any given day builds trust and confidence, which are critical to people feeling comfortable to continue, deepen and sustain their engagement.

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, people referred to engaging in Children's Ground's delivery in ways that demonstrates relational and flexible delivery is occurring.

"We've got other big organisations coming to us, because they know CG has the best relationship with community."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Well, they [Children's Ground staff] come in with understanding, respect, and get along real well with the staff, the children, and their families."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Like if the community wants something, like if they find it hard to go out of the community, they ask Children's Ground, and Children's Ground support them. Like with [a local service], last week we had them hearing mob come out for kids."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

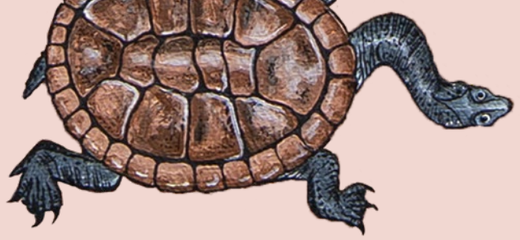
"Well, one time [an elderly person from the community] was stranded at the hospital, she was discharged with her granddaughter, she was crook, and she didn't have no way of getting back. So, I rang Children's Ground and they said, "Oh okay then, we'll come in and pick her up..." So, it took them however many minutes... Picked her up and dropped her off here [in community], and then they went back to the office."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Children's Ground listens to what the family wants... if they want help for things. Yeah, Children's Ground help."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024





Evidence of Children's Ground's relational approach was also observed by some local service providers during service and program delivery collaborations.

"As I keep saying, is that what I could see is that there were strong relationships there. And so, when you commit to those, especially that collaborative piece, is when you're going to get that level of community buy-in."

"I think the relationships that they have with communities and the families is definitely a strength.

"I could see from that one interaction that we had had, that Children's Ground had actually built a really fantastic relationship with people in that community... If there was one person [Children's Ground staff member] that was just walking around the community, everybody knew who she was. All the kids were coming out and saying hello... I really think that's in that relationship building. Obviously you could see that there was a lot of trust and the older members of the community had in you guys. And the kids. You can't fake that ... And the warmth that those kids had toward Children's Ground staff was something else."

Local service providers, 2024

Examples of Children's Ground's flexible, relational and responsive delivery are also included throughout this section and report.

In Children's Ground's experience, demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness can encourage and reduce barriers to trust and engagement, and confidence in seeking support from individuals and families. Responding to small or significant needs of an individual or family has also proven to be a soft-entry point into engagement in the CG Approach.

In evaluation interviews, the majority (eight out of nine) of local services agreed that Children's Ground works in a way that is flexible and responds to families immediate and longer-term concerns. Furthermore, six of nine services agreed that when a child/family connects with Children's Ground, they are supported to access other local services and supports they want/need. Three services responded, 'Don't know'.

Collaboration with local services is also critical to reducing service and system access barriers. In evaluation interviews, the majority (seven out of nine) of local services agreed that working with Children's Ground has supported them to better respond to child and family needs.

In evaluation interviews the majority (eight out of nine) of local services agreed that collaborative delivery with Children's Ground has increased their service's ability to reach and engage with children and families. Almost all stakeholders reported that the main advantage they received from collaborating with Children's Ground was using Children's Ground staff as the 'connector' or 'facilitator' for building relationships with the community.

"During those early days of the partnership [with Children's Ground], things changed. Suddenly, we were seeing more families and more kids. We'd set up a clinic and Children's Ground would help bring people in, run activities, make it engaging. One day we did 14 children's health checks. That's huge. Normally, people don't show up for those. But with Children's Ground supporting us then, we were able to identify chronic issues we wouldn't have caught otherwise. They helped us build trust. Their staff had relationships we didn't. They'd flag concerns, walk families over, follow up when we couldn't. It made our work more effective, more connected. We weren't just chasing people anymore, we were working together."

"I think it just gave me access to the community. If it wasn't for you guys, I probably wouldn't be able to just roll in here and roll out footy. The introduction to the kids has been great. And coming in as a trusted person, like introduced through [a Children's Ground staff] and the other members of the team that have been here, it allowed the kids to show me respect quite quickly, which sometimes would take months and months if you were by yourself. So, I guess having that warm introduction was nice. It was just always very safe. The kids were respectful and lovely. Just a good facilitator I'd say in building the relationship."



"If I had never built the relationship with you, we would never have got in to build a relationship with those kids.... We're very thankful. So yes, if we hadn't built that relationship with you, we wouldn't be able to get in and do these positive programs in the communities. Like I said, in [a community], it was the community who asked us to come back, who said they really wanted us back... last time, it took us maybe three weeks to break the ice with the kids."

"Just getting to know a lot more children and families, that we wouldn't have without Children's Ground. Engaging more children and families. We could rock up with our caravan and do a clinic any day of the week, but pulling the whole event together with Children's Ground made it so much more fun and exciting. We did get to see so many more children."

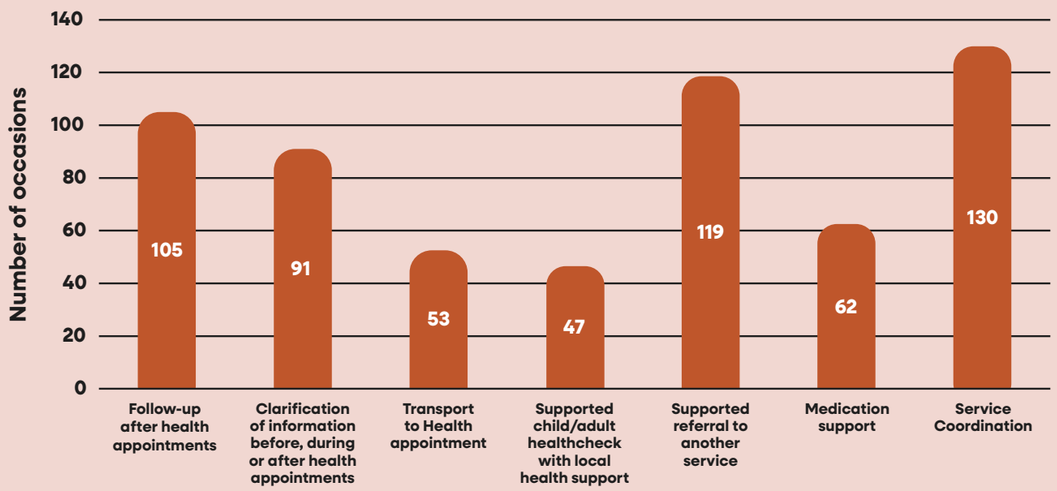
Local service providers, 2024

This section now reports on reduced service access barriers for each area of the CG Approach.

Access to health services

Children's Ground has supported families to access clinical health services, including engaging in health discussions with their practitioners. Between 2022 and 2024, Children's Ground supported 146 individuals with accessing local health services. Graph 3 shows the most frequent types of support provided.

Graph 3: Most frequent types of support to access clinical health services



In addition to this, on 41 occasions, people requested Children's Ground staff accompany them to an appointment.

A lot of this delivery is undertaken and enabled by the flexibility of the CG Approach. For example, following up with families after health appointments and clarifying health information are deliberate strategies that can be undertaken in informal ways, such as while driving, while packing vehicles or preparing food and resources for delivery. These conversations then often lead to health planning and responses.

When a health (or other) concern is identified for a child, young person or adult, Children's Ground health staff can provide support and guidance in the moment, connect them with another staff member, take people to the health clinic or work with them to arrange an appointment on the day the issue is identified.

> "What Children's Ground doing for community. Lots of, like supporting them with transport to the appointments, and meetings at school... Yeah, like you know how [a community member] asks you to go and get prescriptions and that? Well, that's supporting [with health]. And like with [a Children's Ground staff member], like when I asked her, "Can you take me to put power on?" And she said yes, well that's supporting. Like she take me in for power."
>
> 30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024



> "Yeah, when I need help to make an appointment for my kid's health check, I ask Children's Ground to help me, because I know they will help me."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Coordinating local health services to deliver in communities is another example of flexible delivery.

Staff and community members reported that flexibility in health-related transport and referral assistance, and health services in communities helped reduce service barriers and fostered a sense of empowerment.

As one community member reported:

> "Instead of we go to the clinic, they can come here [when local clinic delivers in community]. Because sometimes kids get sick and it's hard to go when we've got no vehicle, we have to catch the bus. Then when you call them [the health service], they say no vehicle to pick up the kids or anybody, adults."
>
> 60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Some community members were unaware that Children's Ground could assist with accessing health services, indicating a need for broader engagement and communication.

Access to education

Children's Ground reduces education access barriers by providing transport to and from all learning sessions and after-hours activities. Data is not captured about such transport.

Children's Ground staff have also supported families with children and young people engaging with primary and secondary school education, including completing enrolment forms, school drop-offs, engagement with school principals, teachers and the Department of Education, and on occasions supported families to attend school for special assemblies and functions.

"And they were trying to help her get the kids back to school, the older ones. The two older ones there, that haven't been going to school, so they were helping them out."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Children's Ground, they help when they're like – for transport and going to school."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Good, I reckon, because they get up for school and... now that there's breakfast program running, they're feeling a lot better to just get up in the morning and know that they're going to come here and... have breakfast and make their lunch"

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

In one community, families faced significant barriers to school enrolment and attendance, primarily due to changes to and limited public transport.

Children's Ground was able to:

- Support all families with enrolment as needed, enabled by Children's Ground's relational approach which meant staff knew all the school age children in the community and who was not enrolled or attending.
- Support children and families to access to school supplies.
- Establish a breakfast program at the community centre for children to have a nutritious breakfast before going to school.
- Support community leaders to address transport issues. This involved negotiations with both transport services and the school. Ultimately, as a short-term solution while negotiations continued, Children's Ground purchased a minibus and wages for a community-based driver. This was funded by a philanthropist as part of their investment in the CG Approach in Darwin.
- School drop-offs and pick-ups were primarily done by community members. Initially, this arrangement was planned for three months to allow time for ongoing advocacy efforts aimed at improving the public bus route. However, the advocacy is still ongoing. When Children's Ground's funding for the driver ended, the school stepped in to continue the transport for a short period.

While this access barrier is yet to be resolved by a sustainable solution, this is an example of Children's Ground's ability to be flexible and responsive in responding to education access barriers and community priorities. Advocacy for a long-term solution to transport with the relevant government department and school continues to be pursued.

Access to employment

Children's Ground's flexible employment model has a non-punitive approach and is designed to remove access barriers. A range of contract types, including casual contracts with variable hours, allows community-based staff to choose arrangements that suit their personal, cultural and family responsibilities, supporting them to meet these responsibilities while maintaining employment, which is reportedly a common barrier to consistent employment.

Staff (and potential staff) are offered a range of employment and personal support at Children's Ground. This includes employment documents, on-the-job training, mentoring, employment literacy etc. For staff who are working in paid employment for the first time, support includes understanding employment systems, timesheets, roles and responsibilities, workplace expectations, workplans and more.

Community-based staff are offered daily transport to and from work when they do not have access to personal vehicles. This has enabled many staff to engage in employment when they otherwise may not have been able to due to a lack of access to transport.

The positive impact of this flexible and supportive employment model is reflected in the steady increase in community-based staff employed over the evaluation period. Staff have reported that this flexibility contributes to their ability to remain engaged and committed to their roles.



"I love Children's Ground because it's got that flexibility now for some days I can just ring up and say, "I'm not available." It's really, really good that way."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Children's Ground's employment model also includes both cultural/community and western-trained roles (remunerated equally at various levels) which is has been a significant enabler for increasing access to employment. This is reported on further in the principle of 'Expect and deliver the best'.

Access to cultural knowledge, practices and transmission

Access to and engagement in cultural teaching, learning and practices in various forms is reported throughout this report, driven by the culturally centred design of the CG Approach.

In evaluation interviews, many First Nations staff and family members particularly reported valuing the on-Country intergenerational learning bush trips. Connecting to country, spending time on country, and accessing bush foods and medicines were particularly important.

> "We take them out, we teach them cultural stuff, like what European don't eat, and what Aboriginal people do eat."
>
> 45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Some families reported not having access to personal transport to spend time on their Country regularly. Some people also noted that some bush medicines are only in places a significant distance away that are not possible to visit on a day trip.

> "There's certain medicines that you have travel out a long way to get. Transport's a big thing, especially living in this community. We're kind of far away from everything, but having you guys there and having support if I need to go somewhere and do something, it's really good."
>
> 30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024



It has been evidenced that Children's Ground has supported children, young people and adults to increase engagement in learning and enacting cultural knowledge and practices. However, First Nations staff and family members have consistently reported this need to occur more frequently, which requires engaging key Elders and cultural knowledge holders for each diverse language and family group across the three communities.

> "We need to have more bush trips, they've been saying to me, 'Can we have more bush trips in community?'"
>
> 45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "I'd love that too, to learn them things [language and culture] but it's died out, died off now. All the old people all passed away now."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

This has been discussed by community governance groups as a key focus going forward, as have holding on-Country camps to provide opportunities for extended and deeper cultural learning.

Access to leadership and empowerment

First Nations regional and community governance has been reported on in the principle of 'Child, family and community led'. However, there are many elements of the CG Approach that work together to create pathways for leadership and empowerment.

The CG Approach is deliberately designed to provide the time and resources required to establish important foundations that enable individuals, families and whole communities to move from a position of being disempowered to one of feeling and being empowered. Addressing the legacy of historical disempowerment of First Nations people in Australia requires a long-term, sustained approach, which is the design and intent of the CG Approach.

Eight[79] of the ten practice principles are designed to provide spaces, opportunities and relationships that enable First Nations people and families to feel comfortable and confident to take ownership and agency over their lives, which they have been denied since colonisation. The influence and impact of the principles is reported throughout this process evaluation section.

The culturally centred and empowered design, governance and delivery of the CG Approach is critical to feelings of safety, respect and trust, all of which begin building during the WTA CEP phase and give communities the control to decide if they want the CG Approach and if so, how they would want it delivered.

The five systems reform areas create the conditions required for First Nations empowerment and leadership to be enacted in governance, delivery and evaluation. Particularly, this report demonstrates that employing a community-based workforce is critical to engagement, service access, empowerment and leadership.

Early-stage delivery of the CG Approach has ensured that First Nations people are holding the power and being supported to lead the change they want to see and achieve for their children, families, communities and future generations.

Over the first five years of WTA and early-stage delivery in Darwin, community staff and families have talked about their experience with individual and collective community empowerment and leadership.

> "Because they [Children's Ground] know that we are community. We know what we want for our kids. I think that's what I like about the organisation. It's First Nations-led."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

> "Like when you speak and they hear you, they make you feel like... talking more."
>
> 30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

One Children's Ground delivery staff member (not community-based) reflected:

> "The biggest highlights. Maybe seeing some of our [community-based] staff really come into their roles, and noticing shifts in their leadership and their confidence improving are probably some of my biggest highlights."
>
> Children's Ground delivery staff member, 2024

These impacts are evidenced throughout the report in both this process evaluation section and in the impact evaluation section.

Over time and as resources allow, early evidence suggests that these short-term impacts will deepen and extend to the broader community populations.

79. Child, family and community led; Culturally safe; Assume and celebrate ability; Innovation – combining old and new; In-community (place-based); Expect and deliver the best; A critical mass; Stay for the long-term.



Summary

Children's Ground has implemented all service areas of the CG Approach to a degree and has effectively established integrated delivery across the service platform. However, internal integration requires increasing and strengthening to grow towards implementing the intended holistic, wrap around and integrated service system. This can be achieved as adequate resourcing becomes available for delivery and community engagement.

Effective collaborations with local services have been established and strengthened over time. This has contributed to enabling and enhanced practice for Children's Ground and local services. This is important progress given Darwin is a more urbanised area where many services exist and often seek to work with the same families and communities.

Internal integration and collaboration with local services collectively contributed to reduced service access barriers for actively engaged children and families. Evaluation evidence demonstrates that this has been driven by Children's Ground's flexible delivery and partnerships with other services, improving access to and engagement in health and other services for families who may otherwise have face barriers. These are important early foundations for progressing towards creating seamless and integrated delivery experience for children and families.

However, evaluation evidence also shows that increased family engagement and adequate resources are required to continue increasing reach, engagement and service responsiveness and significantly reduce access barriers for the broader population in each community.

Overall, this principle has been implemented to the extent intended within the limitations of the growth model.

Innovation – combining the old and new ways

"We don't only do western learning, we do cultural learning. Cultural learning is the best learning for a kid's education, I reckon. Learning in their cultural way should be their first learning. Then Western, of course … because they need to know, they need the Western learning so that when they go out into the Western world, and they want to go and get a job, or they want to go in for a meeting, or go do something, they can then expect, when they get all these big words chucked at them, they're like, okay, well, we know that, we know what that means.

Just imagine an Aboriginal person going into a big government office and having a meeting with the government. The government's going to chuck this at them, and they'll be like, 'No, you stop. You listen to us.' … We've been through education."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

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 approach responds 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 practice post-colonisation.
3. Other global leading practice and pedagogy in relation to learning, health, wellbeing, community and economic development, governance and employment.

The impact of colonisation in Darwin means that pre-colonisation systems of knowledge and practices have been profoundly impacted and disrupted.[80] Most significantly, the land is fully colonised and the dominant social and political systems are western.[81] As a result, Indigenous knowledge systems have been marginalised or constrained, with limited opportunities for the full exercise of pre-colonial cultural practices within urban, settler-dominated environments.[82] [83]

Despite this, individuals and communities still live through cultural authority structures with embedded respect for Traditional Owners, Elders, the law of the land and cultural leadership. In the absence of consistent access to traditional structures such as Elders, cultural authorities and traditional lands/country, people have adapted cultural knowledge and practices to fit their current context.

All communities leading the CG Approach want to revive, strengthen and re-empower First Nations systems of knowledge, language and practice.

The following outlines the main element of this principle that has been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Across the CG Approach, First Nations cultural knowledge and practices are privileged and sitting alongside western, global leading practice and innovation – with cultural and community-based staff, working alongside western-trained staff.

80. Wells, S. (2003). *Negotiating place in colonial Darwin: Interactions between Aborigines and whites, 1869–1911* (PhD thesis). University of Technology, Sydney.
81. Day, B. (2012). *Urban Aboriginal people of Darwin: A history of Larrakia people and urban Aboriginal life*. Aboriginal Studies Press.
82. Ibid
83. Rose, D. B. (2021). Indigenous knowledge and ecological relationships in the Anthropocene. In *Indigenous environmental humanities*. Springer.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following information evaluates the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted the principle of 'Combining the old and new ways'.

5. Cultural and western delivery has occurred, influenced by each community's cultural context

Before Children's Ground

All three communities reported some first language and cultural learning was occurring at home.

No communities reported any services supporting cultural learning.

"Yeah, teach our kids [first language and culture]. Teach our leaders too so then they can teach our kids, because we need our kids to learn culture, knowledge. If they don't learn culture knowledge, they're lost and they'll be drinking when they're teenagers and smoking ganja. You see a lot of that thing happening in a lot of communities in the NT.

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

The highly colonised Darwin context is a significant difference between other Children's Ground operational regions and requires a different approach to the journey and pathway to revitalising and strengthening first language and culture.

Rebuilding language, cultural authority and intergenerational transmission in highly colonised contexts is complex, incomplete and sometimes contested. Rather than 'solving' these challenges, Children's Ground is learning alongside communities how to navigate this space.

Each of the three communities operates within a distinct cultural context, all of which have been interrupted by colonisation. Community leaders and staff have consistently highlighted the impact of many cultural knowledge holders having passed away within their communities. This loss, often a result of colonisation and displacement, has disrupted the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

Despite these challenges, community-based staff have made sustained efforts to identify, engage and employ Elders and cultural authorities to support children's early learning and cultural health. Their involvement has significantly contributed to planning and delivery of cultural learning for both children and adults.

With cultural delivery being led by First Nations staff and families within each community, it is ensuring that cultural teaching, learning and transmission occur at a pace and in a manner appropriate to each community's specific context.

It has taken time for Darwin community leaders and Elders to plan, implement and grow cultural learning and wellbeing across the CG Approach. During the WTA community engagement phase, early learning sessions primarily included western learning. This included Learning on Country sessions, which local staff refer to as 'bush trips', due to uncertainty in the early days about not being on their traditional lands and some limitations in cultural teaching and learning.

As community staff and families built their confidence and experience and started to feel empowered to plan and deliver cultural learning, it increased throughout early-stage delivery – and bush trips started to be called 'Learning on Country'. In each community this occurred at different times and in different ways throughout this first evaluation period.

Employing community-based staff in roles across all areas of the CG Approach, working alongside western-trained staff has been an important enabler for embedding both cultural and western service delivery and opportunities. Due to the constraints of the growth model, in the early years of delivery, employment of community-based staff was primarily in early learning. Over time, this expanded to include roles in health, community development, administration, and Community Lead positions.

The following is a summary of areas across the CG Approach where both cultural and western delivery have occurred effectively – as evidenced elsewhere is this report.

- **In Learning & Wellbeing**, first language and cultural learning have occurred in early learning sessions, alongside English and western learning, and a culturally grounded Child Learning & Wellbeing tool is being piloted. This tool captures children's progress in cultural and western learning and wellbeing.
- **In Health & Wellbeing**, nutrition education includes bush food and medicine knowledge, led by community-based staff and cultural knowledge holders, as well as nutrition education and delivered by western-trained health and learning staff. Health has also included a focus on exploring and enacting culturally based maternal and child health promotion and practices, as well as education around western child developmental milestones, including supporting immunisation and engagement with early childhood 'age and stage' health checks with local health clinics.
- **In Community Development & Wellbeing**, community members reported that governance and decision-making processes have followed cultural protocols, with western-trained staff providing a logistical support role as requested.
- **In Economic Development & Wellbeing**, community-based staff are employed in all areas across the CG Approach with opportunities for cultural expertise and skills. Staff training and professional development has included both western and cultural components.

While progress has been made in establishing and increasing cultural and western service delivery and support, full implementation of this principle remains constrained by factors such as children and families not living on their Country and loss of cultural knowledge holders. Despite these challenges, First Nations staff and families continue to affirm their desire and plan for children learning the Aboriginal language and culture of their family and of the Country they live on.

Summary

Over the first five years, the number of cultural community-based roles across key areas of the CG Approach has increased, resulting in cultural delivery alongside western-based delivery. This grew over time as funding resources increased.

As individual communities and the collective First Nations governance of the CG Approach, staff and families are navigating and, where possible, centring the cultural context of their community and following cultural protocols within the highly colonised environment.

Each community has planned and led cultural learning, health and wellbeing with children, young people and adults, based on the context and pace of their community. Whilst this has been challenging at times, it has also been empowering and there is a strong commitment to cultural learning for children as the next generation.

Expect and deliver the best

"It always will come down to resources. You know, we can come here and give it 100% and make do with what we've got. But if we had whatever, I suppose we could be 1,000%."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

This principle sets the standard for excellence that all children and families deserve, to enable long-term wellbeing. Since colonisation, First Nations peoples have endured genocide and systemic racism, resulting in entrenched structural exclusion, inequity and injustice.[84] [85] [86] Investment in many First Nations communities has historically been, and continues to be, inadequate, characterised by substandard housing, poor infrastructure and inequitable access to services. Complacency and embedded systemic racism perpetuate these injustices, sustaining intergenerational disadvantage.[87] [88] [89]

First Nations children, families and communities deserve – and should expect – the highest standards of resources and service delivery. In the Darwin communities, as a newly established operation, it was anticipated that the quality of delivery would improve over time as resources increased, practices matured, and staff built confidence and expertise in delivering the CG Approach.

A key learning from over a decade of implementing the CG Approach across four regions is that building and embedding excellence takes time. It requires sustained investment, community leadership and a commitment to continuous improvement.

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Ensure First Nations people have access to high-quality cultural and western standards and delivery at all levels within services and systems, with adequate resources to embed excellence.

84. Dudgeon, P., Wright, M., Paradies, Y., Garvey, D., & Walker, I. (2014). The social, cultural and historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. In P. Dudgeon, H. Milroy, & R. Walker (Eds.), Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice (2nd ed.). Commonwealth of Australia.
85. Paradies, Y. (2016). Colonisation, racism and Indigenous health. Journal of Population Research, 33(1), 83–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12546-016-9159-y
86. Markwick, A., Ansari, Z., Clinch, D., & McNeil, J. (2019). Experiences of racism among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 19, 309.
87. Paradies, Y., Ben, J., Denson, N., Elias, A., Priest, N., Pieterse, A., Gupta, A., Kelaher, M., & Gee, G. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. PLOS ONE, 10(9), e0138511. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138511
88. Calma, T., Hirvonen, T., & Bray, A. (2025). *Relationship between systemic anti-Indigenous racism and social and emotional wellbeing and mental health*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
89. Demant, D., Manton, D., Saliba, B., & Avery, S. (2024). *Health inequities in Australia: A scoping review on the impact of racism on Indigenous and other negatively racialised communities*. Australian Human Rights Commission.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following information evaluates the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted the principle of 'Expect and deliver the best'.

1. Access to high-quality cultural and western standards and delivery are being established but require continued growth and adequate resourcing.

Implementing the CG Approach in Darwin represents a new operational context for Children's Ground. This, coupled with only minimal growth in delivery funding over the first three years of implementation has resulted in insufficient financial resources to make significant progress towards achieving excellence within the CG Approach. This has been evident from the beginning as noted in Section 3, which outlined the WTA CEP phase and activity.

Two First Nations staff reported:

"Overall, it's just the money story … it's the money that's stopping us … Because without the money, we can't get resources. Without the resources, we can't deliver."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Even when we say like bush trip, we get all the kids from the community wants to come along. Sometimes the kids miss out because we only have one bus."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Throughout the evaluation period, Children's Ground and community leaders have regularly reviewed and adapted systems and processes to ensure that children and families are experiencing the highest quality and integrity possible within the growth model delivery.



Despite the resource limitations, evidence from staff and management operational reports and evaluation interviews indicate that progress has been made against this principle in following areas:

Community Empowerment:

Governance, planning and leadership processes have strengthened, with consistent and increased community involvement and decision-making.

Employment:

The employment system has effectively supported and enabled community-based employment, with growing numbers and high retention of local staff over five years. See Section 4.3 for detailed data about employment and associated supports.

COVID-19 response:

All COVID-19 planning and responses were undertaken in collaboration with community leaders. Support was responsive and tailored to the needs of families and communities.

Policy Development:

Community-based staff have developed culturally grounded policies and protocols that complement western compliance policies. Senior management observations have seen this increase community-based staff's understanding of western organisational and employment compliance, contributing to increased knowledge and confidence in informed decision-making with their communities and the Darwin region. Each community has established protocols for Sorry Business, including communication processes to ensure staff are informed and can adjust delivery to support the community. There are cultural protocols in place developed by community-based staff for how Children's Ground staff and visitors engage with communities to ensure safety and respect for children, families and cultural practices.

Training and Development:

All staff have participated in internal and external training, including professional and personal development. Western training has covered areas such as first aid, work health and safety, mandatory reporting and compliance training, trauma-informed practice and other professional development and training in workplace rights and employment systems. Cultural learning among adults occurred through engagement with Elders and cultural knowledge holders, peer learning among First Nations staff and the development of community-specific cultural protocols. While this area has seen progress, further investment is needed to expand and improve training opportunities as resources allow.

Integrated Service Platform:

According to the interview findings, integration of education with nutritional intake and universal health promotion have been consistently integrated and of strong quality. High-quality delivery has been achieved across various service areas at different times, depending on available resources and staffing. However, consistent high-quality delivery has been compromised due to limited funding and resources spread thinly, impacting overall quality.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

Daily activity and participation data collection is embedded into service delivery. Evaluation tools have been co-developed with First Nations community leaders to reflect local contexts. Data collected is reviewed by delivery teams monthly, quarterly and/or annually to inform planning and delivery. This includes monitoring the consistency and frequency of participant engagement, evaluating the quality of session delivery, identifying households that are not engaging to plan engagement strategies, and tracking the percentage of the community actively participating. This enables staff and communities to understand regular and overall reach and engagement, to make informed decisions, address gaps promptly, and continuously improve service delivery to meet community needs and priorities. As we continue to strengthen systems and tools for data access, data review frequency can increase.

Evaluation data analysis occurs as separate processes by western-trained evaluation staff and First Nations community staff and leaders. This seeks to provide the space for First Nations analysis to standalone with minimal non-First Nations influences. Over time, as First Nations community staff increase their evaluation knowledge and skills and as the financial resources increase to recruit community Research & Evaluation team members, the non-First Nations influence on community data analysis will reduce.

Children's Ground recognises the inherent challenges with internal self-evaluation, however, it maintains this approach to enable and ensure local First Nations people from each community are involved in leading evaluations of the CG Approach for the region and their community. To reduce and mitigate the challenges and biases, Children's Ground have the following systems in place:

- A separate Research & Evaluation team in each region who undertake evaluation data collection with direction, guidance and leadership from First Nations community staff.
- An independent Research Advisory Group who review and endorse all evaluation reports.
- NT Human Research Ethics Committee approval for all evaluations.
- Drawing evaluation evidence from multiple sources, including external local service providers.
- Comparing internal evaluation findings with external findings where possible, including research reports with and from partner organisations and the external evaluation of the CG Approach commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.

One limitation of this evaluation has been limited resources to engage families in communities who do not participate in the CG Approach.

Data, evaluation and research sovereignty:

In line with Children's Ground's practice and research/evaluation principles, communities own all data that is collected about children and families for delivery, evaluation and research, with this data housed by Children's Ground. As noted above, delivery and engagement data is regularly provided to First Nations staff and communities for review and use in planning and community level reflections and evaluation.

Evaluation data will be provided back to all communities through community evaluation reports and summaries, with First Nations staff deciding what data will be included and the format of the summary. Community specific evaluation data will be provided to each community for use in planning and as part of their community-level longitudinal evaluation.

Children's Ground is also developing additional tools to strengthen data sovereignty across all regions related to both delivery and evaluation data.

Organisational Backbone Support:

Regionally based support functions such as Human Resources and Monitoring & Evaluation have been strengthened. However, middle management and IT roles remain under-resourced at the Darwin regional level.

Prioritising community engagement:

The decision by one community (in 2023) to cease delivery of some areas of the integrated service platform and refocus on community engagement was an example of organisational processes and standards that ensure the CG Approach moves and develops at the pace of each community. This decision was made by a Community Lead because it was recognised that the quality of delivery of the CG Approach was compromised and required a renewed focus.



Community-based employment and governance have been central to embedding cultural expertise, standards and safety across the CG Approach.

In evaluation interviews with both First Nations and non-First Nations staff, a consistent theme to emerge was that Children's Ground has been actively building towards excellence within available resources. It was also evident that expectations of what can be achieved through a limited growth model have been managed well, with actively involved community staff and family members recognising that building and embedding excellence takes time.

Processes articulated in this section demonstrate that Children's Ground is establishing and building early foundations to support long-term quality and impact as resources increase.

Summary

Establishing and embedding cultural and western standards, processes and policies that can enable excellence in delivery of the CG Approach has been compromised but is on track within the limitations of the growth model resources.

The most significant enabler of progress towards excellence has been First Nations cultural and community-based employment and governance. This, coupled with the deliberate and empowering processes embedded within the CG Approach design have been enacted through this and all other principles.

Assume and celebrate ability

"We do. Because that's something we tell them [communities]. Children's Ground is you. You are Children's Ground. This is for you ... and they know that now. So, I think that's why they come to more, hey, they always look for CG. CG is not... we don't ever judge. It's not a judge. Like it's not ever looked down."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Children's Ground's underlying assumption is that communities are filled with talent that has historically been unrecognised, overlooked or exploited, and rarely have First Nations communities been offered the opportunity and support to apply their talents.

This principle underpins a strength-based approach that assumes ability, moving away from deficit- and crisis-focused service models that continue to dominate mainstream systems and are often shaped by siloed funding streams and performance indicators that reinforce disadvantage.[90] [91]

The CG Approach design means that people don't come to Children's Ground just because they have a problem. Instead, families engage to support their children's learning, to work, to govern and lead, to connect with family, to participate in cultural teaching and learning, and to share and grow their knowledge and skills.

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Recognise the strengths and abilities of all children, families and communities, creating environments where everyone can succeed by applying and building on their talents.

In Children's Ground's experience in all operational regions, when communities are empowered and trusted to design, govern, deliver and evaluate the services intended to support their children and families, the relationship with services fundamentally shifts, with people moving from being passive recipients to active agents of change, fostering ownership, responsibility and leadership.



90. Fogarty, W., Lovell, M., Langenberg, J., & Heron, M.-J. (2018). *Deficit discourse and strengths-based approaches: Changing the narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing*. The Lowitja Institute.
91. Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study report* (Vol. 1). Australian Government.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

The following information evaluates the extent to which Children's Ground has enacted the principle of 'Assume and celebrate ability'.

1. Children's Ground has created environments and opportunities for children, young people and adults to apply and develop their strengths.

Before Children's Ground

No communities reported people having access to programs, employment and activities that enabled them to apply and build their strengths and talents.

An explicit intent to create environments where people of all ages can apply and build on their strengths has been evident in early-stage delivery of the CG Approach. This has occurred in a range of ways across the CG Approach, beginning with establishing environments where people feel comfortable, confident and safe to share, apply and explore their strengths and talents.

CG Approach delivery which has contributed to this has been or will be reported through both the process and impact evaluation sections.

A brief summary is provided here:

- The WTA CEP phase was the beginning of building relationships, agency and most importantly trust of people whose communities will be empowered through Children's Ground.
- Cultural and community-based employment and governance have reportedly contributed to feeling of empowerment, agency, pride, confidence and purpose.
- The employment model has mobilised community strengths and talents.
- Learning and wellbeing activities – including over extended hours – have created environments for children, young people and adults to apply and develop their strengths.
- Working to privilege first language and cultural knowledge systems has reportedly provided spaces for people to feel more confident expressing and developing cultural skills and practices, and exploring how to revitalise and learn other languages and practices.
- Community events and celebrations have provided positive and safe social and cultural environments for celebrating local skills and talent.
- Visible in-community early learning and after-hours activities have provided soft-entry points into the CG Approach for families to express and develop strengths across a range of areas including learning, health, employment and community governance.
- People employed with Children's Ground have also been supported to share and build on their strengths and talents through training and professional development as part of employment.

Furthermore, some community staff who have been employed with Children's Ground since the early days, have built their confidence to speak up at government and stakeholder meetings and present at national and international conferences.

Between 2020 and 2024, five First Nations leaders presented at conferences, including the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education, the national *Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women & Girls)* Summit and the World Community Development Conference. These experiences have reportedly contributed to professional development as well as building people's confidence in sharing their voice at global platforms.

In evaluation interviews, staff/family members reported feeling comfortable, respected and confident within Children's Ground, and feeling empowered and valued. This has provided spaces for people to apply and build on their strengths and talents.

"I just like it. I was just – this is genuine, this organisation. Like I feel like I can be me... It's just built around for me, and they was flexible. The kids felt comfortable. I felt comfortable... I would never probably find another workplace like this... It's a good feeling. Especially when you're getting the feedback and the acknowledgement from community. You know you're doing something right. So yeah."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"I actually do feel different. Like I feel empowered, like I feel that maybe we can make our community change, like we can make our community better."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024



Summary

Children's Ground has effectively created environments and opportunities for children, young people and adults to apply and develop their strengths and talents.

Progress with this principle has been enabled by providing a range of positive opportunities for children and families to engage with across the CG Approach. Community and culturally based roles have also been important opportunities for people to apply their knowledge and talents and learn new skills.

Culturally safe

"Funerals and Sorry Business. Yep, yep, that's the most important thing. Children's Ground – they hold it in high regard, respect, yep, yep. … And when you work with an Aboriginal person you've got to respect that. … When you're working in an Aboriginal community, that's the first thing to do, is respect our culture. …. And respect is mutual with Children's Ground."

45-50 years, male, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Since colonisation, First Nations peoples have been required to navigate dominant western systems that have often been culturally unsafe, damaging and lacking in respect or understanding.[92 93]

The principle of 'Culturally safe' seeks to reverse this legacy by creating environments that centre First Nations worldviews, are culturally responsive and prioritise cultural safety and respect for all people.

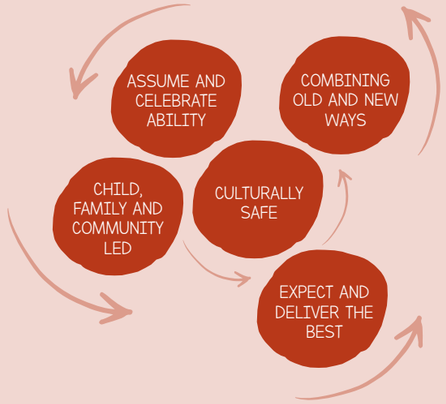
Children's Ground recognises that cultural ceremonies, roles and responsibilities are important times for families to come together and follow cultural protocols. These are known to be critical to cultural identity as First Nations people and are important for experiential cultural teaching and learning with children, young people and adults of all ages. Therefore, the structures and processes of the CG Approach ensure 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 and, where appropriate, children during these periods, and encourages families to return to work and education sooner.

Enacting this principle involves a holistic integration of local and organisational systems, structures, policies, practices and people. Together, these elements aim to ensure that First Nations people have the freedom 'to be First Nations people' without compromise.

Evidence of this principle in practice has been presented throughout previous sections, reflecting its interconnectedness with other principles of the CG Approach. These connections are visually represented in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Key principles informing cultural safety



The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Ensure Children's Ground is an environment that centres a First Nations world view and privileges over 65,000 years of knowledge and practice.
2. Deliver services, environments and systems that value, respect and embed First Nations people, and cultural knowledge, practices and systems.
3. Ensure First Nations people feel comfortable and safe within all Children's Ground environments, as participants, employees, leaders and supporters.
4. Ensure First Nations people feel the freedom to follow uncompromised cultural practices and systems.

92. Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015). *The white possessive: Property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*. University of Minnesota Press.
93. Sherwood, J. (2013). Colonisation – It's bad for your health: The context of Aboriginal health. *Contemporary Nurse*, 46(1), 28–40.

What does the evaluation evidence show?

Before Children's Ground

No communities reported that their language and culture was privileged and enacted to ensure cultural safety in delivery.

Almost all community staff and family members interviewed reported experiencing Children's Ground as a culturally safe environment, either explicitly or implicitly.

Strong themes across evaluation interviews included the importance and value of community-based employment as a significant enabler for providing culturally safe delivery and employment environments.

Actively engaged community-based staff reported that Children's Ground respects and honours First Nations culture, with support for cultural practices and ceremonies, including decision-making processes guided by cultural and community protocols. Staff and families described Children's Ground as a place where they feel valued, where cultural identity is upheld, and where people feel their voices, perspectives and decisions are being heard and informing service design and delivery, which in turn enables cultural safety.

All Children's Ground's delivery staff (non-First Nations and non-community-based staff) take cultural direction from community leaders, respecting community authority and ensuring that cultural protocols guide all aspects of service delivery.

One delivery staff member emphasised the importance of informal mentoring provided by First Nations community-based colleagues, describing it as essential to their ability to work effectively within the community. Another staff member identified this as an area for development, noting the need for more structured guidance and mentoring to support non-First Nations staff in navigating cultural contexts, and engaging respectfully and effectively in community-based work.

As evidenced throughout this report, community staff and family members interviewed also reported the strengths and challenges of engaging children, young people and adults in teaching and learning first language and culture, due to the enduring impact of colonisation.

These are all key elements of cultural safety, particularly in communities where first language and cultural knowledge and practices have been significantly impacted by colonisation.

Each element of this principle has been reported on in other related principles. However, the extent to which community members feel culturally safe at Children's Ground is best evaluated through their words.

The following is a collation of quotes from evaluation interviews with First Nations community-based staff and family members.

"Everything. Like they know there's cultural boundaries. You know, the whole cultural awareness about things. Pretty sure they've got a pretty good – you know … just say we don't want to talk to everyone. We'll tell you, [community name], community is closed. There's Sorry Business. You will respectfully go back and tell everyone. And the word gets out, yeah, things like that."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Well, with Children's Ground, like they respect us in the community, like if they want to work in the community, they ask permission. And like they have patience like when they want to talk to people... Like we respect Children's Ground. And Children's Ground they respect our decision as well."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

You can go in there [Children's Ground] and say, "Right, this is the atmosphere, I can feel it. Children's Ground and [community name] community, they're on the same level."

45-50 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, it makes them [families] feel good. Even though if you've got a European worker next to the family member, they don't have to feel like, if they feel embarrassed, at least they've got a family member there to talk to them."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, it'd be good for someone [from a different family/language group] to step up and take the lead. Because in communities you've got so many different – not just one family looking after families and stuff like that. Because you've got different cultures in the community. They may not all be from just one group; they'll be from several different groups. [So, good to get] different groups involved teaching. They can do cultural teaching and stuff like that."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"She can also learn from other families when they come and join in Children's Ground. I like to see her try and learn what they are learning about, like which medicine and stuff like that."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, it is happening. Every time we take the kids out on bush trips, we're teaching them – when we welcome people to our Country. Like, we have to do it like... from the sun rise to the sun goes down."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Summary

Cultural safety can only be evaluated by people from communities who live and experience it. The evaluation evidence in this section and throughout the report demonstrates that Children's Ground has created cultural safety in employment, governance and delivery.

While progress with the principle has enabled cultural safety across the CG Approach, it has also been enabled by the deliberate design of the Approach, including the community-based employment, cultural community-level governance, and privileging and promoting cultural knowledge and practices in all areas of delivery.

Stay for the long-term

"The Majesty put us in chains and took over. Government doesn't see it the way the community owners see it. Government comes in with services in one area only and do nothing. They stay for six months and have no impact"

First Nations Community Leader, excerpt from a Community Plan

First Nations peoples have endured over 230 years of systemic inequity, disempowerment and exclusion across social, cultural and economic domains. Addressing this legacy requires a long-term, sustained approach to create, consolidate and maintain generational change for current and future generations.[94] [95]



The principle of 'Stay for the long term' moves away from a traditional 'quick fix' crisis-driven approach and instead promotes consistent and sustained support for children and young people from birth to 25 years.

This ensures continued support across all major life transitions – from early childhood through primary and secondary education, and into early adulthood. Children's Ground's 25-year vision and strategy is designed to walk alongside children, families and communities throughout this journey. It reflects a commitment to deep, enduring relationships and long-term investment in community-led change.

While the CG Approach is grounded in a long-term strategy, funding for the full implementation and the complete 25-year journey has not yet been secured.

The following outlines each of the elements of this principle that have been evaluated.

What is being evaluated?

1. Provide consistent and sustained systems of services and supports over 25 years, that are designed, governed, delivered and evaluated by local First Nations people.
2. Disrupt the status quo of short-term funding cycles that create a barrier to meaningful change.
3. Transform disadvantage to opportunity by creating a new pathway for future generations.

94. Paradies, Y., Ben, J., Denson, N., Elias, A., Priest, N., Pieterse, A., Gupta, A., Kelaher, M., & Gee, G. (2015). Racism as a determinant of health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE, 10*(9), e0138511. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0138511
95. Calma, T., Hirvonen, T., & Bray, A. (2025). *Relationship between systemic anti-Indigenous racism and social and emotional wellbeing and mental health*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Before Children's Ground

No communities reported services and organisation making a long-term commitment to whole-of-community change.

The longevity of the CG Approach can only be assessed over time. The limited growth model operations with Darwin communities means it is too early to evaluate the extent to which this principle has been achieved. However, there are key conditions and environments that have been established that can demonstrate early foundations of the potential for longevity of the CG Approach in the Darwin region.

The key foundational conditions and enablers progressing towards 'Stay for the long term' include:

- Children's Ground has the authority, strategy and commitment from communities for long-term delivery. This has been provided through First Nations governance structures.
- Establishing and growing collective community governance structures has been important. These have built the foundations of community ownership and empowerment for longevity of the CG Approach and mitigate risks of non-First Nations influence over community aspirations, plans and decision-making.
- The empowerment of community staff and families evidenced throughout this report has been an enabler for engagement and will be a critical driver for longevity of the CG Approach.
- The cultural strength and aspirations within each community have also been a key driver of engagement and empowerment.
- The appetite within communities for employment with Children's Ground demonstrates the desire and aspiration of people to work in and with their community.
- Funding and delivery growth over the period was incremental, however each community has a long-term Community Plan for what they want to achieve through the CG Approach. This demonstrates that the community leaders are thinking and planning for the longevity of the CG Approach.
- The strength of Children's Ground's collective investment funding partnerships has enabled the CG Approach to sustain delivery. Not being dependent on a single funding source has meant that during times when funding grants have started and stopped, collective investment has enabled Children's Ground to continue providing the space and resources for communities to maintain consistent delivery.

Already, 'Stay for the long-term' has been embraced as a key strength, underpinning community's confidence, trust and commitment to engage.

> "We've got the 25-year approach. That's not going anywhere."
>
> 45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Progress towards sustainable operations has and will continue to be monitored by Children's Ground and the Darwin communities. Through embedded cultural and community governance, planning, reflection and reporting processes, important learnings are being captured regularly. These inform ongoing development of the CG Approach at a community and regional level.

Summary

The evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that in the three communities, Children's Ground has established a solid CG Approach growth model, with consistent place-based delivery in and with communities increasing over the period. This is important in communities where service access, particularly in-community access, has previously been unreliable and subject to change.

This is the beginning of the journey for Darwin communities working to enable a generation of children to grow up secure in their culture, identity and rights, with the cultural and western skills for lifelong wellbeing and opportunity.



4.3 Impact evaluation findings and analysis

The following sections present the observed early indications of impact of the Children's Ground (CG) Approach for children, families and communities during the evaluation period.

Given delivery of the CG Approach in Darwin is only in its infancy, extensive impact is not expected at this stage. Progress towards short-term impact is the key focus of this section, with short term progress indicators assessed in relation to their contribution to long-term outcomes for children, families and communities, within the context of the growth model.

The key impact evaluation question is:

What progress occurred towards the long-term evaluation outcomes?

This is evaluated by understanding the extent to which key conditions for long term impact are being established in this early stage of delivery, including a focus is on access and engagement, and impact as reported by families.

The section is structured against the key outcome areas of the western evaluation framework (see Appendix 3), as follows:

- Change and impact for children
- Change and impact for families
- Change and impact for community

As outlined in Section 2: Methodology, evaluation data analysis includes three complementary methods: 1) Contribution Analysis; 2) Most Significant Change; and 3) Causal pathways perspective.

Each of the outcome areas include the following to evaluate the extent to which the Children's Ground has contributed to any early-stage changes for children, families and communities as a contribution towards the long-term outcomes.

- A summary of **key evaluation findings**.
- Children's Ground's l**ong-term outcomes and short-term progress indicators** for the full CG Approach across Years 1 to 3 of delivery.
- **Contribution Case – evaluation evidence:**
    - A **Contribution Case Summary**: Summarising the evidence of Children's Ground's contribution to short-term outcomes for children – in line with the ToC.
    - A **Most Significant Change story**, including why each story was selected.
    - **Evaluation against progress indicators**, including internal activity and delivery data (quantitative) and evaluation interview (qualitative) presented under short-term indicators of progress towards long-term outcomes.
    - Where relevant, brief descriptions of access and engagement **before Children's Ground** – as reported by community leaders and families.
    - **Alternative explanations for contribution**.
- Summary analysis of **contribution case evidence and findings**.

Evaluation data presented covers the early-stage delivery period from 2022 to 2024, unless otherwise stated. Please note that during early-stage delivery of a growth model, Children's Ground population and engagement numbers include people who are permanent residents, frequent and in-frequent visitors. As a result, engagement numbers will be higher than population data from external sources.

Impact findings should be read in the context of process findings, in relation to the extent to which the ten practice principles have been effectively implemented, because these create the conditions and environments for achieving short-, medium- and long-term change.

Impact findings should also be read considering several contextual factors, including:

- The full CG Approach was not operational during the period, limiting evaluation to early-stage proxy outcome indicators and the core conditions and environments for long-term change.
- COVID-19 significantly affected the WTA CEP phase and early-stage delivery.
- The evaluation did not include a consistent baseline measure of outcomes across all communities.
- Children's Ground is working to establish a First Nations-led system of learning, health, employment and wellbeing – an approach for which no mainstream benchmarks currently exist.

As noted previously, it is important to also note here that communities started delivering the CG Approach with differing levels of community cohesion, governance and leadership structures, cultural continuity, service accessibility, infrastructure, population stability and community participation.

With the CG Approach being implemented in line with the varied community contexts and priorities, regional level progress should be interpreted through the lens of community-level differences in implementation and engagement and participation patterns.

These contextual factors influenced both the opportunities available prior to Children's Ground and the types of changes that families were likely to observe, experience and value.



Change and Impact for Children

Key impact findings for children:

- Improved access to in-community early learning (cultural and western) led to more children engaging in early years learning and health promotion.
- Supporting families primary school enrolment, transport and homework club led to increased engagement in primary school for young people.
- Regular health promotion literacy led to children learning and demonstrating preventative health behaviours.
- Increasing the number and frequency of child engagement in early learning remains a focus.

Children's development in their early years of life directly impacts their lifelong social, education, health and economic wellbeing, as early childhood development shapes cognitive, emotional and physical outcomes across the life course. Adverse childhood experiences are strongly associated with increased risk of mental health conditions, chronic disease and poor socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood. [96] [97] [98]

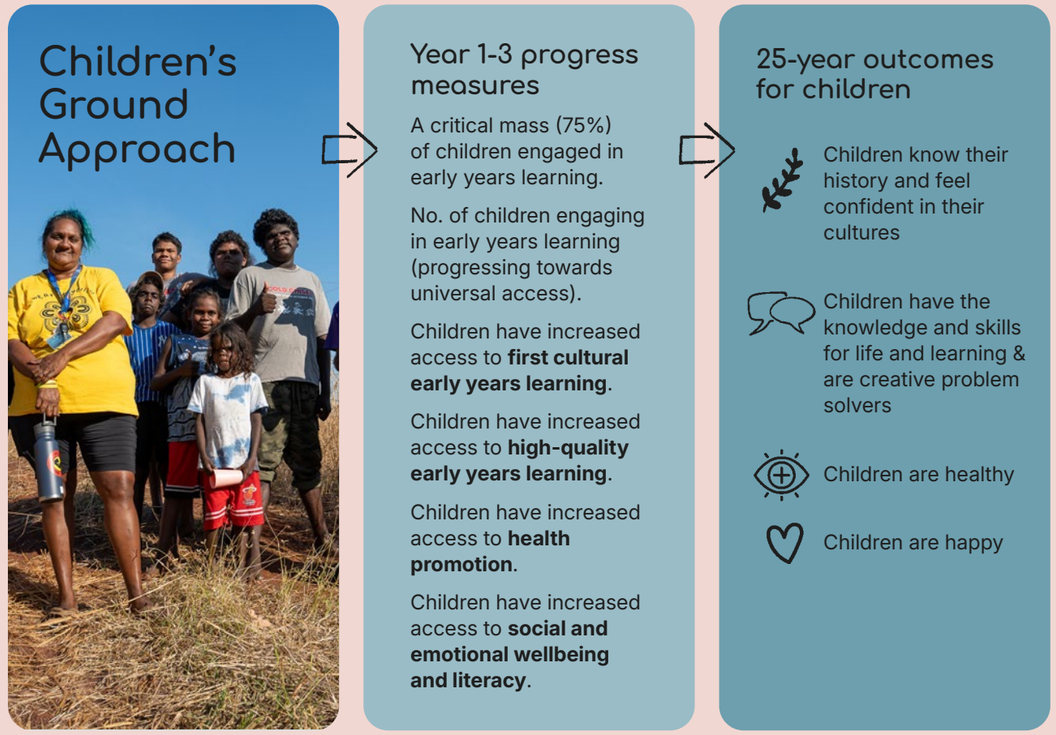
Recent Closing the Gap data demonstrates that First Nations children continue to experience significantly poorer outcomes than non-Indigenous children nationally, particularly in early childhood development and education.[99] [100] In the Northern Territory, outcomes have worsened across key indicators, including child development, early childhood education, youth engagement and health, with the NT recording some of the lowest developmental outcomes nationally. [101]

Change and impact for children is expected to be achieved over the 25-year period. At this early stage, establishing access to services and engaging children and families is considered early change and impact, as shown in Figure 11.



96. Shonkoff, J. P., Slopen, N., & Williams, D. R. (2021). Early childhood adversity, toxic stress, and the impacts of racism on the foundations of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 42, 115–134.
97. Moore, T. G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2021). *The first thousand days: An evidence paper*. Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.
98. 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.*
99. Productivity Commission. (2025). *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report 2025*. Australian Government.
100. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2023). *Closing the Gap targets: Key findings and implications – Children thriving*. Australian Government.
101. Productivity Commission. (2025). *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report 2025*. Australian Government.

Figure 11: Long-term outcomes and short-term progress indicators of the full CG Approach for Year 1 to 3 of delivery



The Contribution Case evidence demonstrates any early change and impact that has been achieved and the extent to which the CG Approach has contributed.

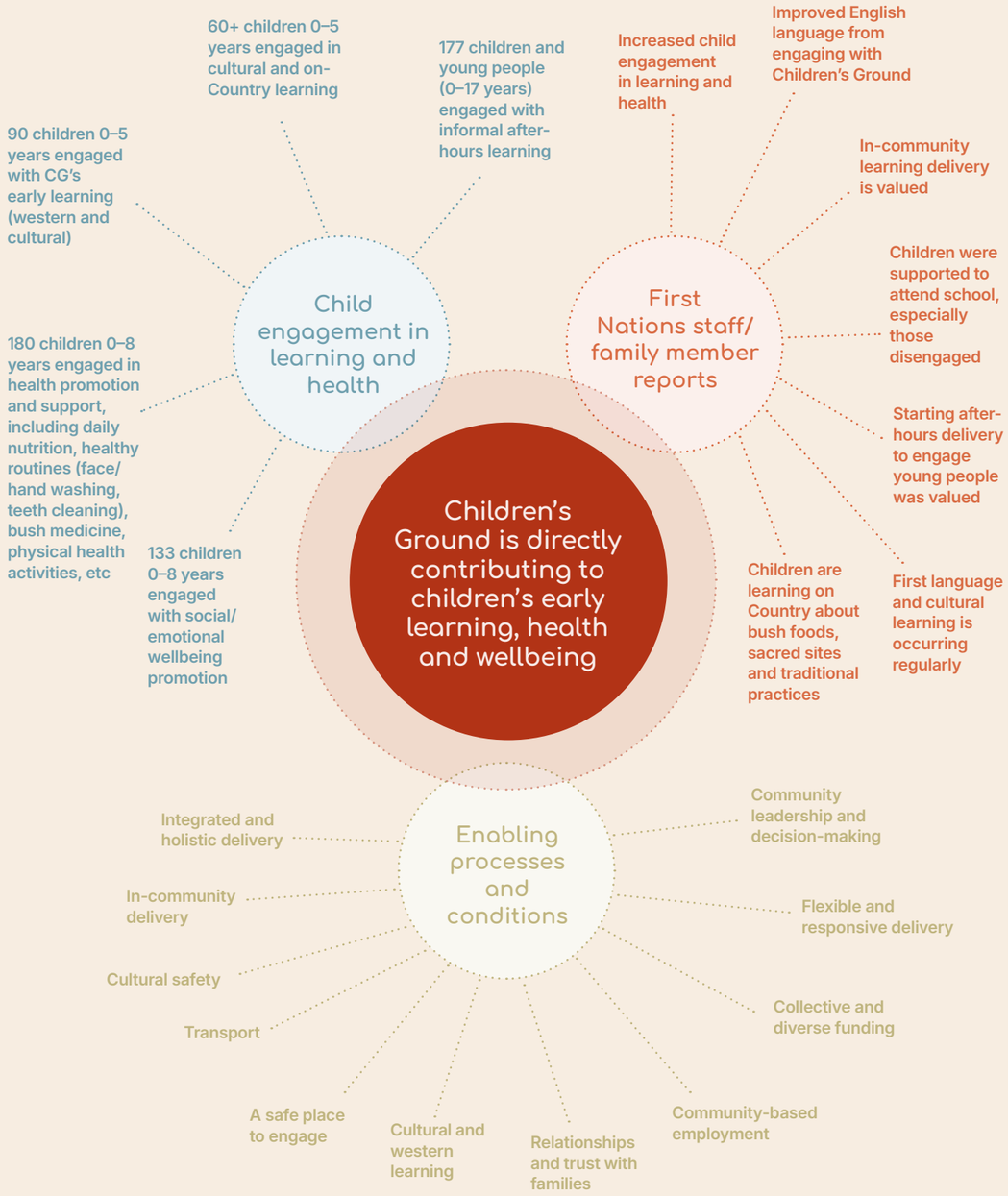


Contribution Case – Evaluation evidence

Contribution Case Summary

Figure 12 summarises evaluation evidence that demonstrates the progress and contribution Children's Ground has and has not made to early change and impact for children.

Figure 12: Summary of Children's Ground's contribution to early change and impact for children



Most Significant Change story

This story relates to all four long-term outcomes for children, however, the representation of child health and happiness does not feature strongly. A separate story is included within the 'Children are Healthy and Happy' outcome area.

"That trust is everything"

– 55-60 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

My name is Darryl, and I'm the father of a beautiful little girl named Ovaidah. She's only two and a half, but she's already showing signs of being incredibly smart and curious. Every day, I see her learning something new, whether it's a word in our language, the name of a native fruit, or how to wash her hands properly. It fills me with pride.

At home, I speak to Ovaidah in both my language and her mother's. Sometimes she'll point to a wallaby and say "mic," and I just smile. That's not something I taught her in a formal way. It's something she picked up from being around us, from listening, from being part of our world. She's learning about our culture naturally, and Children's Ground has helped make that possible.

The teachers [Children's Ground Educators] give me great feedback about her learning. They say she's picking things up quickly, and I can see it too. She's starting to speak English well, and she's learning healthy habits. Just the other day, I was changing her nappy and went to wash my hands first. She followed me to the sink and said, "I want to wash hands." That's something she's learned both at home and at Children's Ground.

One thing I wish I had is a vehicle. I want to take her out bush more often, to camp, to teach her about the land and our ways. Camping is so important for our young ones – it's where they really connect with culture. I've got knowledge to share, and so do others in the community. We do what we can, but having more support would help. I've asked to join the next bush trip with Ovaidah, and the staff were really welcoming. I haven't had the chance yet, but I'm looking forward to it. Being part of her learning journey means everything to me.

What's changed most since Children's Ground came into our lives is the happiness I feel, not just for Ovaidah, but for all the kids. Seeing them attend sessions, learn and grow gives me a big high. The trust the kids have in the staff is a huge achievement. That trust is everything. She's always excited to go to Children's Ground.

I remember one morning, she was so eager she tried to open the gate herself, but she's still too short. I had to lift her up and help her through. She was already dressed and ready, practically bouncing with excitement. That kind of enthusiasm doesn't come from nowhere, it comes from feeling safe, loved and engaged.

When people ask me about Children's Ground, I tell them nothing but good. They've done a marvellous job. I'd love to see more activities where parents and kids can come together, maybe even more movie nights or more bush trips. Life gets busy, but those moments matter.

Children's Ground has made a real difference in our lives. I'm grateful, and I'm excited to keep walking this journey with them.

Why was this story selected?

The First Nations Selection Group identified this as the most significant in early years learning because it highlights the real impact of Children's Ground on a child's development. Told from a father's perspective, it shows his pride in his daughter's progress, especially her improved English and healthy habits, and his growing desire to be involved. While he's not fully aware of all the support available, he trusts that Children's Ground is a place he can turn to. The story reflects the strength of a culturally grounded learning environment and reinforces Children's Ground as a safe, trusted space for families.

As the Most Significant Change story, it does not represent the experience of all children engaged with the Children's Ground. This story demonstrates the impact of engagement with Children's Ground for some and the potential it holds for all actively engaged children.

The following sections present evaluation data against the relevant short-term progress indicators within Children's Ground's western evaluation framework for the initial delivery years of the CG Approach.

Child Outcome: Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning & are creative problem solvers

Contribution: Children are increasing engagement in early years learning

Progress measures:

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

Early years learning

Since Children's Ground started, early years learning delivery has become more accessible in two communities, building consistency in delivery. While engagement numbers varied, for both communities early years learning is now a regular, weekly, community-led and accessible service.

As reported by communities, this is a significant change compared to access to early learning before Children's Ground started.

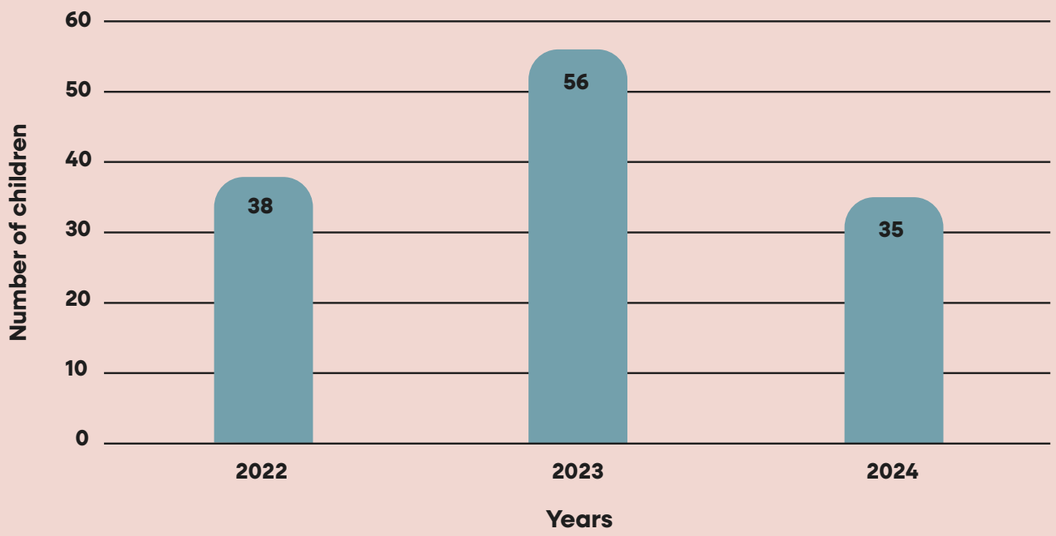
In one community where there was a lower number of children, and where families were accessing external providers prior to Children's Ground, establishing a regular early years learning offering was not their key priority. In response, after-hours hours activities engaging children, young people and families became the focus.

Before Children's Ground

All communities reported that many children were not engaging in early years learning.

One community reported children were engaging in a playgroup delivered in their community.

Another community reported some children engaging in a service outside of their community.



From 2022 to 2024, 90 children aged 0–5 years engaged with Children's Ground's early learning.

In 2022 and 2023, one community also had access to one day a week of early learning through another service provider. While not captured in Children's Ground's data, this contributed to access and engagement for children in that community. Children's Ground collaborated with the service provider to ensure that delivery days did not overlap to maximise engagement of children with both early learning programs. However, that program ceased their operations in the community in mid-2023.

Graph 4 presents the number of children 0–5 years engaged in Children's Ground early years learning by year across the three communities.

Graph 4: Number of children (0–5 years) engaged in early years learning, by year

The increases and decreases in engagement are consistent with early-stage delivery, community population changes and impact of COVID-19. While early-stage delivery began in 2022, all Darwin communities continued to focus on WTA community engagement as they established each service area of the CG Approach. Furthermore, COVID-19 significantly impacted delivery and therefore engagement in 2022.

The decrease in 2024 resulted from reduced engagement in one community due to local community unrest and population mobility in two communities. During community population mapping processes, two communities identified that in 2024 a few families with young children who had been living in community during and since COVID-19, returned to live on their homelands and other families secured housing elsewhere in Darwin.

One community noted that in 2023 there were a lot of visiting families who stayed for a few months and engaged in learning with Children's Ground, contributing to high levels of engagement in that year.

This decline is consistent across other CG Approach delivery areas.

Population mobility is expected to impact Darwin operations and reinforces the importance of continual community engagement and an ongoing need to develop relationships with new families. These are important learnings for the delivery of the CG Approach in this different operational context.

In evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members, most people reported that the early years sessions are going well.

With English as the primary language of instruction in Darwin communities as Aboriginal language revitalisation takes time to build, staff/family members reported that English language development and western learning has been a positive outcome of children participating in early years learning sessions. Many attributed improvements in children's English to their participation in Children's Ground.

"Oh, real well. The parents are proud of their speaking. Yeah, really well. Children's Ground help a lot."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"We have young kids under the age of five – so one to four, and one of the babies are still growing – and we want to get them school-ready. So get them into learning basics, and then once they turn that age into kindergarten or primary – or transition, sorry – they have a good headspace, they up here, and they have good manners. Because I believe, you know – not mentioning by name, but one little girl, she's got very good English, just by going through the early learning years. And when she got to school she's a really talkative child."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Yeah. They always come here and sit and are listening and learning her to speak English … A lot better."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024



Many families also reported changes and improvements to increase the reach and engagement of children and families in early years learning, including:

- There needs to be more early learning sessions for children.
- Some families did not know a lot about Children's Ground's early learning.
- Not all children are going to the early learning sessions
- At times there are not enough early years kids in the community.
- Children's Ground can provide support to improve children's western learning because many kids are not going to school.
- Once the children have left early years, there's no follow-up with the kids in terms of their education.

These demonstrate the need for broader family and community engagement which is a consistent finding throughout this evaluation. They also show the need for strengthened relationships between Children's Ground and local schools.

After-hours learning

Before Children's Ground

Two communities reported that there had been ad hoc delivery of after school hours programs, which on occasions included short bush trips to close by areas.

In response to variable early learning engagement and community requests for opportunities for children and young people to engage in activities after school hours, each community established additional learning environments through after-hours activities.

From 2022 to 2024, 177 children of all ages (0–17 years) engaged in after-hours and school holiday activities as informal intergenerational learning environments. This included 56 children 0–5 years and 121 young people 6–17 years.

For some children and families, these activities were a different pathway into engaging young children in early learning and engaging adults in employment and community governance.

The after-hours activities were widely valued by families, with strong participation from children, young people and some family members.

"They didn't have any... sort of thing, which made them feeling bored and stuff like that. And just sitting at their home all day, and straight after school, but now they know they get the chance to do after-hours/ after school."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Well, I see that movie night where they have it, that's a good thing, bring the kids together. Activities, like on school holiday, that's really good for kids. Then you get all the kids participate."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, we need more... When they see Children's Ground they just run, and they do stuff. They like playing and learning."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"It was good that we got them [young people] out and about, part of the community, out of the house. They enjoyed it. They would come to me – every time we had it on they would come, knowing that they were just getting out of the house. They would have fun, fishing, talking to us. Just coming out of their little comfort zone. It was good... Yeah, time to come together and things like that."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

During this evaluation period, Children's Ground's after-hours delivery could only achieve occasional delivery across all three communities due to limited resources. One family member reported:

> "These kids, they're always asking, "Can Children's Ground do something like during middle of holidays, like for three weeks' break? Can we do like cultural stuff like camping, even go out to camping?" That's what they're always asking me."
>
> 30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Some after-hours programs were facilitated in collaboration with other organisations highlighting Children's Ground's role in improving access to a wide range of services (see Section 4.2, principle 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' for further details about delivery partners).

Across both early years and after-hours learning, increasing engagement of family members remains a focus of each community.



Responding to emerging community priorities

Concerns raised in-community about children not attending school led to a targeted focus on re-engaging and re-enrolling children into local schools. Staff/families reported that Children's Ground played a key role in supporting school engagement, particularly for children transitioning into school or returning after extended absences. This involved building relationships with local schools, active support with enrolment and addressing transport barriers. Families reported that Children's Ground has contributed to young people attending school more consistently.

Furthermore, in 2023, Children's Ground responded to a community-identified need for supporting some families experiencing challenges with school engagement. Children's Ground delivered 29 homework club sessions in one community, supporting children aged 11–17 years, over a period of seven months.

In evaluation interviews, community staff/family members reported that this support was highly valued, and improved school engagement and education outcomes.

This occurred before Children's Ground's after-hours team were established, so without adequate dedicated resources at the time, when the western-trained staff member leading this program left the organisation, the homework club support ceased.

The community have expressed strong interest in seeing this support resume. Children's Ground is exploring the potential to formalise partnerships with local schools to embed collaborations and supports such as this and others.

> "We did have homework club... We need to do more of that though. Because the kids, they really love doing homework club. Because they keep asking me like, "When are we going to do homework club. We're going to have to sit down and have a talk about it."
>
> 30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

The flexibility of the CG Approach ensures that communities can respond to concerns raised in a timely manner. At times, Children's Ground has been able to support communities to directly respond to concerns raised. At other times, Children's Ground has worked in partnership with local services to jointly respond, and has supported communities to advocate to relevant organisations to respond.

However, at times, inadequate resourcing saw some important and enabling activities end for children and families.

Progress indicators not progressed

Within the growth model, it was not expected that the progress indicator of 'A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early learning' would be achieved. It was also not expected that the progress indicator of 'Children aged 3–5 years are engaging in early years learning at Universal Access[102] levels' would be achieved within the growth model.

Summary of progress

Overall, there has been in an increase in access and engagement in early years learning across the Darwin communities. Variations year-on-year were aligned with early-stage delivery, community population changes and impact of COVID-19. Population mobility is expected to have an ongoing impact on children engagement and consistency year-on-year.

Children's Ground has established 'in-community' delivery of early years learning in two communities as a regular and consistent service offering that has become a key part of community life. A small after-hours learning program was established, engaging many children in fun learning activities during key risk periods.

With early learning and after-hours planning, engagement and delivery led by community-based staff, Children's Ground has been able to increase and diversify delivery based on community-identified needs and priorities.

The progress to date has built the foundations for ongoing and increased access to and engagement in learning, community employment and centring of early childhood learning as a key preventive pathway critical to long term impact.

This has been evidenced by the MSC story and broader learning engagement data, demonstrating that Children's Ground has made a significant contribution to increasing engagement of young children and young people, regular learning opportunities and supported primary school reengagement for some children.

This, coupled with process evaluation findings about effective in-community place-based delivery, demonstrates the enabling conditions for engagement are being put in place to build from over time as resources become available.

102. 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.

Child Outcome: Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures

Contribution: Children are engaging in first language and cultural learning

Progress measures:

- Children have increased access to first cultural early years learning.
- Number of children engaged in first cultural early years learning.

Before Children's Ground

All three communities reported that for some children cultural learning occurred at home, and that no organisations were supporting cultural learning opportunities.

One community reported families are living on their Country in their Darwin community.

As demonstrated in the Most Significant Change story and 'Before Children's Ground' snapshot, for some children first language and cultural learning is occurring at home. However, for other children, families have reported this is not occurring at home.

Cultural and on-Country learning has been delivered from the outset throughout both the WTA phase and early-stage delivery. In 2022, Learning on Country was delivered when COVID-19 limited in-community delivery.

From 2022 to 2024, 76 children 0–8 years engaged in cultural learning through early years and after-hours learning sessions, with 71 engaging in on-Country learning. Graph 5 presents the number of children engaged in cultural learning and wellbeing, and engagement in learning on Country.

Graph 5: Number of children (0–5 years) engaged in cultural and on-Country learning, by year



Over time community designed and led cultural learning has strengthened, however this remains an area for growth and improvement in both delivery and engagement.

The slight decrease in 2024 engagement is consistent with that seen in the early years learning data (presented in the previous section) and is largely due to population mobility in two communities and the ongoing culture re-empowerment journey in each community.

Findings from evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members identified that Children's Ground's cultural learning delivery was widely valued by community members. Many family members reported that cultural learning happens at home and agreed that it also sometimes occurs in Children's Ground, mainly through on-Country learning bush trips. Cultural learning was described as engaging and effective by many community members.

Children were reported to be learning about Country, bush foods/nutrition, sacred sites and traditional practices. Through this learning, children are engaged in play and inquiry-based experiential learning, learning about cultural protocols, practices and skills and using cultural content as a foundation for other learning activities. Many community members also noted that First language learning was occurring at the sessions.



"When going out on Country, and then bringing back into the community, their knowledge and learning from on Country will come back to the community and then the kids are learning. It's really good that they're learning."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Mostly they talk about like sacred sites ... And these kids, they're good listeners too. They sit down and ... even when they're moving around, like they still listen to [cultural educator]."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"They learn when travelling out bush and what to eat, what not to eat, and safety when you're near the water. Stuff like that."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Learning culture, like learning things, like snakes and everything. Animals. Yeah. And the language. What they call them. The names, that stuff."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"They'll just show us where the sites are around... Usually sit around and just talk about stuff, what we do in Country sites, and elder stuff. Because when we grow up we'll know where it is and everything."

15-20 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, it's being done at home, and also with the class [at Children's Ground] ... [has Children's Ground helped?] Oh, a great deal, enormous, yeah."

55-60 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Staff/family members reported that more cultural learning is required, particularly on-Country learning.

"More bush trips and more activities and teaching them how to go out [on Country] and teaching them culture out on Country... Maybe long-distance travel, like just to take the kids on a trip. Like two nights away somewhere."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"We're meant to be learning them all the time at Children's Ground, about cultural learning. And we've only been doing that – I don't know – once a week. We should be doing that all the time. You know what I mean?"

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"I haven't seen that language much ... but [an Aboriginal language] mob got their own language. That mob from [another Aboriginal language group] got their own language. Get [a person from the community] to join in, and you get maybe [a family group] or [another family group]. Then you can have everyone in the community, make their voice strong."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

As previously reported, each community is revitalising culture and language in a context of significant oppression and damage. First Nations leaders have regularly discussed the impact of colonisation and stolen generations disrupting cultural and first language learning for many families.

In the community where families are living on their traditional lands, they could readily support cultural learning and activities on Country. Another community was able to access Country with transport resources and support. However, the third community had limited access to Country due to distance. These differences influenced the type and extent to which cultural teaching, learning and engagement could occur.

First Nations cultural and language learning must be led by the right people for that land and language. Communities reported struggles with lack of Elders and cultural and language knowledge holders, people not living on Country and the teaching children with so many diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

"... We're not strong on our language. You know, we come from the background of Stolen Generation, so we've lost that... [Learning on Country happens] But we're not fishing on our Country. You know, we're not going to our homelands. We're still in Darwin. But Darwin's home... Like we're born and bred here. But it's not our homelands."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Because you've got about two or three different languages here. You've got us, we're [an Aboriginal language speaking group] and you've got these mob here, they're [another Aboriginal language speaking group], they speak [an Aboriginal language]."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, something I want to teach... but to teach it I've got to get taught myself. You know what I mean?"

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

A key focus for Children's Ground going forward will be increased support for communities to engage Elders and cultural authorities to maintain and increase active engagement in cultural learning.

In one community, First Nations community-based staff directly linked challenges with family engagement to not having the right people culturally to teach the diverse language groups within the community.

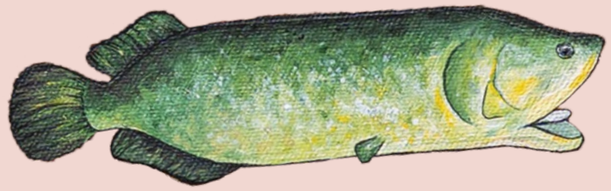
Summary of progress

This Contribution Case demonstrates that cultural and language learning is occurring within Children's Ground learning sessions, however, families have different perspectives about how regularly, and all families reported that more first language and cultural learning need to occur.

As shown in the Most Significant Change story and 'Before Children's Ground' snapshot, for some children, first language and cultural learning is occurring at home. However, this was not reported as the case for all children.

Each community is beginning to establish first language and cultural learning at their own pace. Due to colonisation, maintaining, strengthening and revitalising culture and language is a slow journey that requires the right cultural protocols and people to lead. Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the foundations for cultural strengthening and development are being re-established through community leadership within each community.

While still in the early stages of delivery, this is also contributing to establishing the foundation for achieving the community level outcome of 'The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing'.



Child Outcomes: Children are healthy and happy

Contribution: Children are regularly engaging in health and wellbeing promotion, literacy and behaviours

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.

Before Children's Ground

Two communities reported local health services visiting their community on occasions.

Children's Ground health promotion delivery

Children's Ground delivers health promotion and support in both universal and targeted ways:

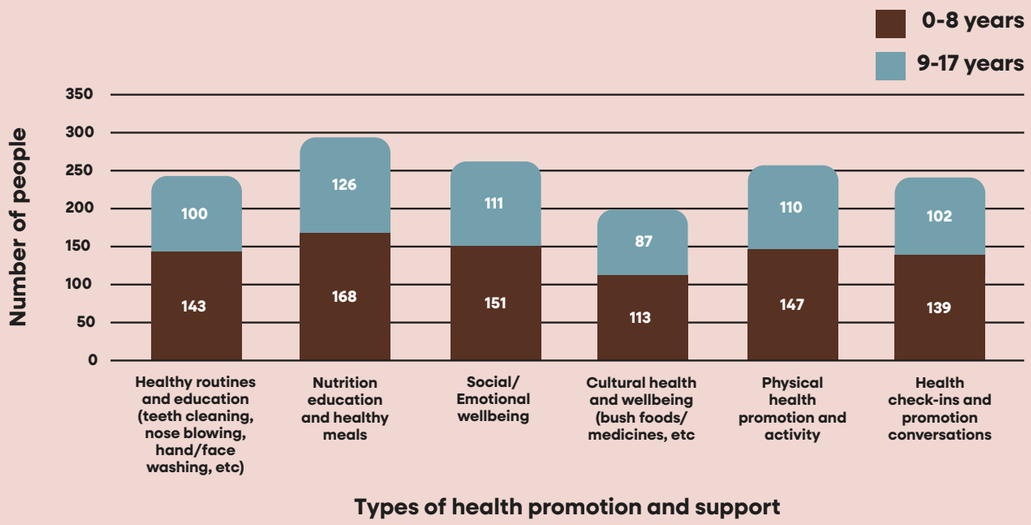
- Universal health promotion and support is delivered in early learning and after-hours learning sessions.
- Targeted health promotion and support is delivered outside of learning sessions.

These are delivered by Children's Ground and in partnership with other local services.

Data presented throughout this report includes engagement in both universal and targeted health promotion and support, unless stated otherwise.

Since the beginning of early-stage delivery, 180 children aged 0–5 years actively engaged in health and wellbeing promotion and support. As described previously, various physical, social/emotional and cultural health promotion activities are integrated into all early years and after-hours learning sessions. Graph 6 show the number of children and young people engaged in health promotion and support, including social/emotional wellbeing.

Graph 6: Number of children and young people engaged in health promotion, by type, from 2022-24



Establishing healthy routines and daily nutritional practices has created health literacy as critical foundations for illness prevention and health behaviour changeover time. Integration of bush foods and medicines and cultural health practices into early years and after-hours learning has contributed to health and wellbeing, as well as cultural learning.

Emotional literacy and regulation strategies for promoting and managing emotions have been a focus for social and emotional wellbeing promotion. Along with daily nutritious meals, physical activities and targeted health checks (e.g. skin, ear health and oral health) integrated into all learning sessions, these health practices are examples of increased and regular access to preventative health literacy for children and their family, covering physical and mental health and wellbeing.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff and family members reported that Children's Ground has made a strong contribution to health promotion and literacy among actively engaged children, specifically through engagement in early learning sessions. Staff/families reported children engaging in and learning about healthy routines such as handwashing, cleaning sores and brushing teeth in the early years sessions.

Nutrition education was also noted by families, with children learning about nutritious food, making healthy choices and trying new healthy recipes. In two communities a breakfast club was delivered, contributing to nutrition literacy outside of early learning sessions. However, inconsistent delivery of this was also noted, and it ceased due to inadequate resourcing.

> "Yeah, they brush their teeth. I saw my little granddaughter today taking a brush and brushing her teeth... Yeah, [she learned that] at Children's Ground."
>
> 60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "When they got sores, they will ask for things to look after themselves. It's good."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "She's looking at us how we cook and how we clean, she's learning all that."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "They love doing the diabetes... the heart and thing program. And learning about their organs, they really enjoy doing that... They do nutrition, they do that every Wednesday. Yeah, doing for breakfast, they tell them what they are eating, and what the food does to them."
>
> 45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

A few family members reported that healthy routines and health promotion are enabling children to become more independent and influencing routines at home.

> "There'll be meals that they never cooked before and we've cooked this for our sessions and parents have asked us to do a – you know, to copy it out. So, they take it home."
>
> 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

> "[About healthy routines in early learning] Oh yeah, definitely. For sure. It's given me more confidence in myself to get a routine and stick to that routine with the kids. It gives me time to have for myself if I have them in a structured routine. They learn their routine. They know their routine. They know what comes next."
>
> 30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Some families reported that consistent delivery of healthy routines (e.g. face/hand washing, teeth cleaning, etc.) used to be strong, but consistency has decreased with staff turnover.

One staff/family member reflected on the up and down nature that occurred in health delivery over the years.

"Well, we don't have any health and wellbeing at the moment, and the kids are missing out. They love doing their little tracing of their body, and naming and stuff like that. They enjoy doing any activities to do with running just in general outside the community hall."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Some families were not aware of health promotion occurring within early learning sessions, which is consistent with the extent of their engagement in the CG Approach – again demonstrating the need for broader family and community engagement.

Collaborative health delivery with Children's Ground and local services

Children's Ground is deliberately not a clinical health service. Rather, delivery staff provide support for children and their families to engage in local clinical health services. Data about this is presented further on in this section in Outcomes for families.

During early-stage delivery, Children's Ground collaborated with local services to support increased access to and engagement in clinical health. This saw children actively engage in health checks and immunisation clinics, with follow-up appointments booked for ongoing treatment as required.

While not selected as a Most Significant Change story, this story is important to include to demonstrate the ways in which Children's Ground and local services have worked together to reduce barriers to health service access and engagement for children and families.

"Their [Children's Ground] staff had relationships we didn't."

Local service provider

Back when Children's Ground first began working with us, we were already servicing two of the communities, but it was hard to reach everyone. We'd go out, do house visits, chase people across Darwin and Palmerston, trying to follow up on health needs.

During those early days of the partnership, things changed. Suddenly, we were seeing more families and more kids. We'd set up a clinic and Children's Ground would help bring people in, run activities, make it engaging.

One day we did 14 children's health checks. That's huge. Normally, people don't show up for those. But with Children's Ground supporting us then, we were able to identify chronic issues we wouldn't have caught otherwise. They helped us build trust. Their staff had relationships we didn't. They'd flag concerns, walk families over, follow up when we couldn't. It made our work more effective, more connected. We weren't just chasing people anymore, we were working together.

This story reflects the early stages of our partnership with Children's Ground, when collaboration was strong and impactful. While the relationship has shifted in recent years, it highlights what was possible when trust and coordination were at their peak.

In evaluation interviews with staff and families, many people referred to the support they receive from Children's Ground to access local health clinics for their children's health needs. When asked what type of support they have accessed through Children's Ground, families reported the following:

"I think Children's Ground came in and gave us more support, by calling Danila Dilba and asking them to come back in. Because after when Amity fell, because their contract stopped, so they just all of a sudden just stopped coming in here."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yeah, yeah, Children's Ground do. They bring [a child from the community], he needs to go to appointments to have needles all the time for his heart. Yeah, good, very good."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"When you mob have your mob Children's Ground, they work together with Danila Dilba. That's a good thing too because then you got that person in there... And when you've got Danila Dilba and your Children's Ground one... they [Children's Ground community staff] can go and explain to them in their language and tell them, "Come over for health check." And then... explain to them mob there, that will make it better."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

In evaluation interviews with local health services, providers reported that their collaboration with Children's Ground led to increased child engagement in their services and earlier identification of illness for some children. Most noted that this was because Children's Ground staff have relationships with families.

The following quotes are from local service provider interviews:

"Well, I would have probably never got in to engage with those kids. If I had never built the relationship with [Children's Ground], we would never have got in to build a relationship with those kids. ... We're very thankful. So yes, if we hadn't have built that relationship with you, we wouldn't be able to get in and do these positive programs in the communities."

"We definitely wouldn't have been able to reach the kids [without Children's Ground]. So generally when we do go into a community setting, a lot of the adults and people that know that they have vision problems or aware that they need an eye check, they're the first ones to engage with the service and often the kids."

"Just getting to know a lot more children and families, that we wouldn't have without Children's Ground. Engaging more children and families. We could rock up with our caravan and do a clinic any day of the week, but pulling the whole event together with Children's Ground and stuff made it so much more fun and exciting. We did get to see so many more children. So I think that was the highlight."

Local service providers, 2024

Summary of progress

Children's Ground has increased access to and engagement in preventative health for young children. While the Family Health team was under-resourced due to the growth model, the integration of universal and targeted health promotion and support into all early years and after-hours learning sessions has provided consistent access and delivery of health promotion, enabling actively engaged children to learn about healthy foods, healthy behaviours and illness prevention from their earliest years.

While health promotion in learning and access to clinical health did not feature significantly in the MSC story, progress with this has been evidenced by other evaluation data as part of the Contribution Case. The Contribution Case demonstrates that for some children, healthy behaviours are also translating into home environments.

Relationships with local services have contributed to child engagement in important clinical health checks, which were available in their community through service collaborations.

Evidence of increased access, engagement, cultural confidence, health behaviours and early learning progress reflect the short-term changes expected from early-stage delivery of a growth model. While medium- and long-term generational outcomes will only emerge over time, the evaluation confirms that the critical building blocks for sustained, intergenerational change are in place and operating as intended.





Alternative explanations for contribution

Understanding alternative explanations for contribution to change and impact is critical to the Contribution Analysis method.[103]

The evidence shows that Children's Ground supported children's engagement in western and cultural early learning with integrated health promotion. In one community this complemented and built on early learning already being delivered once a week. This service ceased in 2023.

Therefore, Children's Ground was the primary contributor to children engaging in early learning, after-hours learning and health promotion during the evaluation period.

Child health promotion was reportedly not occurring in any of the communities before Children's Ground started. However, there were reports of local clinical health services visiting communities on occasion. Children's Ground's health promotion delivery, particularly integrated within the 2–3 early years learning sessions per week and after-hours learning sessions, was the main contribution to children's engagement in health promotion.

During or before Children's Ground started, no other local services were consistently supporting cultural teaching and learning opportunities. The Most Significant Change story and evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members shows that, for some children, learning is occurring at home. Therefore, Children's Ground and families together were the primary contributors to children engaging in first language and cultural learning.

Summary of early change and impact with children

As outlined in the Contribution Case, there is evidence of early change and impact for children, particularly in relation to early childhood learning and health. This has been enabled by the progress made in key practice principles (as seen in the process evaluation) which are establishing key foundations for early and long-term change.

During early-stage delivery of the CG Approach, the evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has increased access to and engagement in early learning for young children, both cultural and western learning, as well as increased health literacy and preventative health behaviours. The evidence also demonstrates that for some children healthy behaviours are also translating into home environments.

Relational, flexible and consistent in-community delivery, as well as family employment and community leadership have all contributed to short-term changes in children's learning, health and wellbeing.

While the Family Health team was significantly under-resourced due to the growth model, the integration of universal and targeted health promotion into all early years and after-hours learning sessions, coupled with responsive support to access clinical health services has provided consistent access and delivery of health promotion and support. This is ensuring that children are learning about healthy foods, healthy behaviours and illness prevention from their earliest years and this is enabling children and their families to engage with important clinical health services.

Relationships with local services contributed to child engagement in important clinical health checks, which were available in their community through service collaborations.

Important foundations of improved in-community service access have been achieved. These require increasing and consolidating as resources increase, at which point the early-stage progress made with some children can be achieved more broadly.

103. Mayne, J. (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect* (ILAC Brief 16).

Change and Impact for Families

Key impact findings for families:

- Community-based employment has led to increased First Nations employment, with 33% of people working in paid employment for the first time.
- Increased access to and engagement in health services for children and their family – through collaborative service delivery with clinical health.
- Positive engagement of young women in Women's groups focused on SEWB, engaging alongside their mothers and grandmothers. Establishing young men's is a high priority.
- Increased in-community activities and events have led to increased engagement of children, young people and adults in positive and safe intergenerational environments.



Western research has long recognised that families have the greatest influence over a child's development and life-long wellbeing.[104] [105] [106] A child's family and community environments are key determinants in their social wellbeing, physical health, mental health, educational and economic outcomes.[107]

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 equitable opportunities.

The short- and medium-term strategy is to support families to provide the environments children need to thrive. During early-stage delivery, particularly within this growth model, progress indicators focus on families walking alongside their children and the social, economic and wellbeing of families, as shown in Figure 13. Sustained change and impact for families will be realised over the course of a generation.

104. Yang, Q., Yang, J., Zheng, L., Song, W., & Yi, L. (2021). Impact of home parenting environment on cognitive and psychomotor development in children under 5 years old: A meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Pediatrics*, 9, 658094.
105. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2016). *Applying the science of child development in child welfare systems.*
106. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). The role of the family in child wellbeing. In *Australia's welfare 2015* (Australia's Welfare Series No. 12, Cat. No. AUS 189). Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d868e2c0-6304-4468-928e-21a5b3540198/aw15-3-1-role-of-family-in-child-wellbeing.pdf.aspx
107. Moore, T. (2024). *Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice*. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2



Figure 13: Long-term outcomes and short-term progress indicators of the full CG Approach for Year 1 to 3 of delivery



Children's Ground Approach

Year 1-3 progress measures

No. of children have families participating alongside them in learning, health and development

No. of families involved in their community alongside their children

Young people and adults have increased access to economic opportunities and support

No. of families (young people and adults) engaged in employment

Families have increased access to health promotion

Families have increased access health and social supports

No. of families (young people and adults) engaged in health and SEWB promotion

25-year outcomes for families

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

Families are economically strong

Families are healthy and socially strong

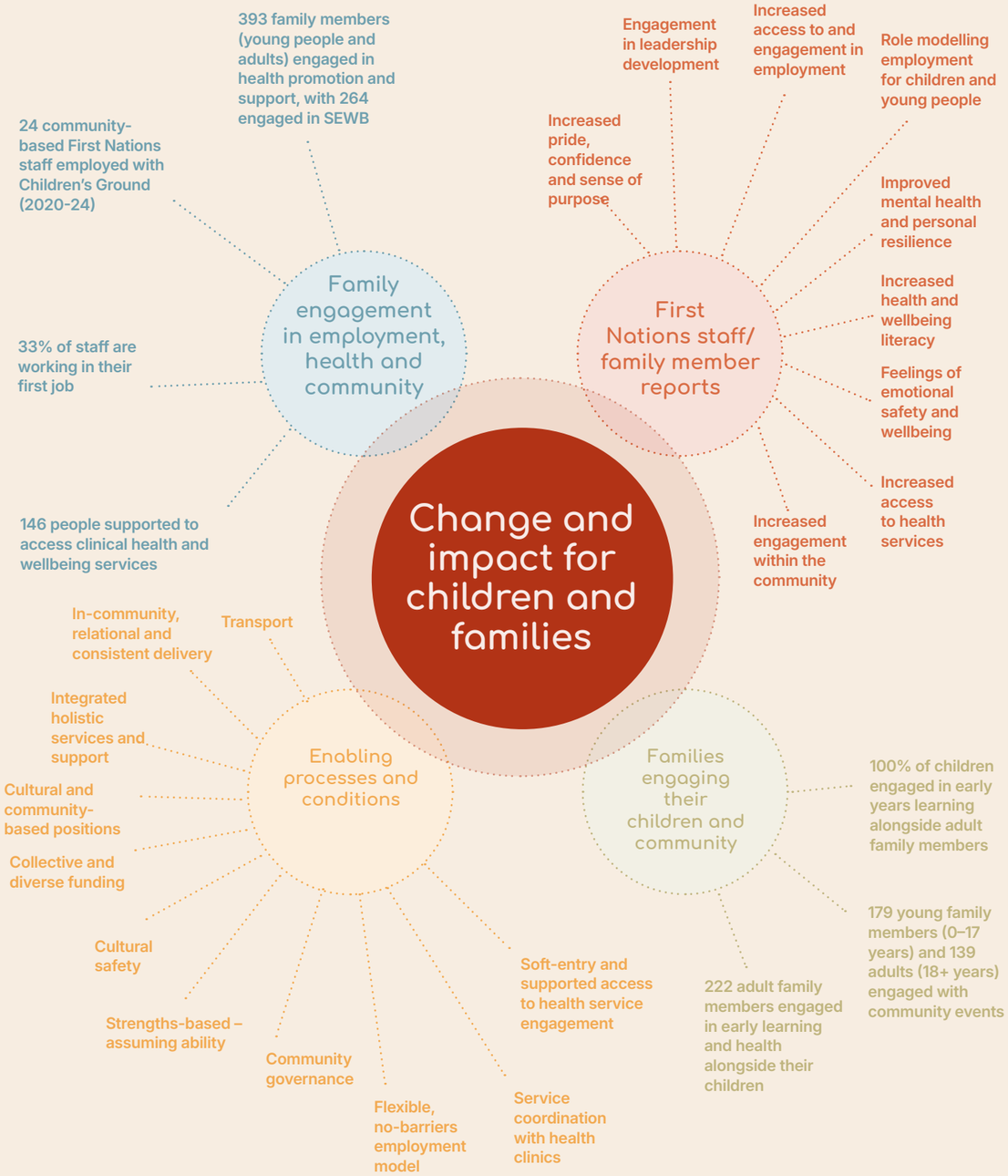
The Contribution Case evidence demonstrates any early change and impact that has been achieved and the extent to which the CG Approach has contributed.

Contribution Case – Evaluation evidence

Contribution Case Summary

Figure 14 summarises evaluation evidence that demonstrates the progress and contribution Children's Ground has and has not made to early change and impact for families.

Figure 14: Children's Ground's contribution to early change and impact for families



Most Significant Change story

This section includes two Most Significant Change stories to evaluate progress across the three long-term family level outcomes. This first story relates to the long-term outcome of 'Families are economically strong'. While this story also relates to the other family outcomes of 'Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development' and 'Families are socially strong', these are not the focus of this story. This story also relates the long-term community outcome of 'Community enjoys employment and economic opportunities', which will be achieved over time as a result of a majority of families experiencing economic strength.

"The best job in the world."

– 35-40 yrs, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

I never thought I'd be working. I was a homebody, didn't leave the house, didn't want to talk to anyone. I'd get anxiety just thinking about going out. When Children's Ground first came around, they were walking through community, knocking on doors. I'd hear them and just close my door. For three months, I kept shutting them out. I'd grab my baby, put her on the titty so she wouldn't make noise, and tell my son, "Shh, we're playing a game." I didn't want anyone to know we were home. But then one day, I thought, "I better not be rude." I went to a session [in the community]. And I liked it. After a couple of weeks, I thought, "Oh, deadly. This white mob don't tell me what to do." They were asking me what I wanted my kids to learn. I was like, "Oh, I don't know." But they weren't pushing anything. They were listening.

After three months of coming, they offered me a job. I started casual. I liked my bank account every Friday. That was new for me. I hadn't worked in 13 years. I was just a mum. But having a job brought pride into my house. My kids were like, "You got a job, Mum?" And I felt good. I felt strong. I started going into the office more, just calling up and asking, "Can I come in?" They'd say, "Sure, no worries." I'd bring my kids. I felt comfortable. The kids felt comfortable. It was flexible. It was built around us. Then they asked who wanted to help out at this other community.

I started doing engagement there, knocking on doors, jumping fences, even picking up dead cats in kitchens. I was doing the hard yards.

Eventually, my name started getting known across the Top End [Children's Ground region]. In 2022, I flew to my first conference in Adelaide. That was big for me. I started travelling more, speaking up for our mob. I became a voice for the Top End of Children's Ground. Now I'm in a leadership role. I sit in meetings, I help with planning, budgeting, everything. But I still go back to community, talk to families, knock on doors. I don't want to be above anyone. We walk together. I want everyone to know what I know.

Children's Ground gave me stability, hope and pride – not just for me, but for my kids too. It's First Nations-led, community driven. That's why I'm here. I won't work for no balanda [non-First Nations] telling me how to live my life. This is our organisation. It's genuine. It's for us. We've done so much with so little – sometimes no power [at the community centre], sometimes just one staff. But we kept going. The only thing holding us back is the money story. If we had the funding, we'd be unstoppable.

I tell everyone: I have the best job in the world.

Why was this story selected?

The First Nations Selection Group identified this as the most significant in the employment domain because it speaks directly to the strength of community-led work. This story highlights pride that the community member feels for working with Children's Ground in that it is led by First Nations people; run by mob, not by outsiders. From beginning to end, it reflects why she wanted to be involved and why her children loved being part of it. This story also reflects a common theme across other stories in the domain: children are at the centre of everything. It's about empowerment – our kids, our families and our communities leading the way. This story shows how Children's Ground is not just about jobs, but about ownership, identity and creating meaningful change.

As the Most Significant Change story, it does not represent the experience of all staff form the communities who are engaged with the Children's Ground. This story demonstrates the impact of engagement with Children's Ground for some and the potential it holds for all Children's Ground staff from the communities.

The following sections present evaluation data against the relevant short-term progress indicators within Children's Ground's western evaluation framework for the initial delivery years of the CG Approach.

Family Outcome: Families are economically strong

Contribution: Children's Ground created meaningful and flexible employment pathways for adults and young people

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.

Before Children's Ground

Two communities reported many people in their community were unemployed. The third community reported many people were working, but none within their community.

All communities reported having little to no employment opportunities available in their community.

In one community, an employment service was working with people, however, the service reported challenges with engaging community members and community members raised issues of red tape as an engagement barrier.

Another community reported some community employment with a service delivering a playgroup once a week.

Since Children's Ground started, people in the Darwin communities leading the CG Approach have had access to employment and jobs working in and with their family and community.

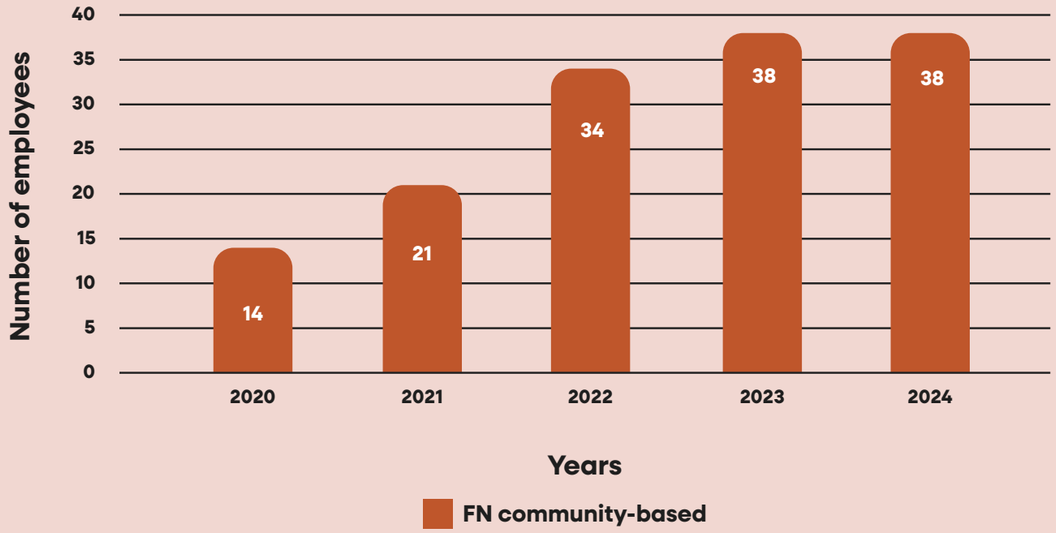
From 2020 to 2024, 24 community-based First Nations staff were employed with Children's Ground. Of this, 33% reported that working with Children's Ground was their first job.

Furthermore, 46% reported they were not in paid employment when they started with Children's Ground, with a third of people not having worked within the past 12 months.

During this evaluation period, Children's Ground also employed 22 First Nations people who are not community-based staff.

Graph 7 shows the number of community-based First Nations staff employed with Children's Ground in each year of the evaluation period. Following this, Graph 8 shows the number of community-based First Nations staff employed, by contract type and average hours worked throughout the WTA community engagement phase and into early-stage delivery of the CG Approach.

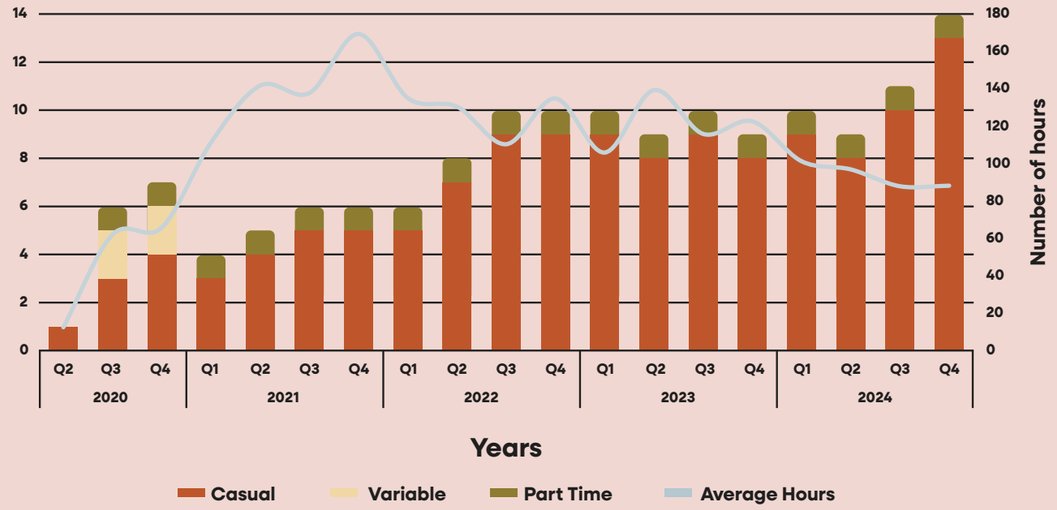
Graph 7: Number of community based First Nations staff employed with Children's Ground, by year



Of the community-based staff employed, five were young people aged 15–24 years of age. Employment of young people began in 2023 and increased in 2024 with dedicated funding to engage young people in employment. For some young people, their engagement in employment has been inconsistent as they have built their experience of employment, starting and stopping their employment at points in time.

Enhancing workforce support resources to ensure young people have all the support they need to engage and build consistency in their employment is an area for growth and improvement.

Graph 8: Number of community-based First Nations staff employed, by quarter, year, contract type and average hours worked



This data shows a steady increase in First Nations community-based employment over time, with periods of fewer staff working and fewer average hours worked. This pattern is expected as people begin employment and build towards engagement consistency.

The increases and decreases in average hours worked is also consistent with Children's Ground's experience of community-based employment, because many First Nations staff live with chronic ill-health, and persistent grief and Sorry Business, requiring time away from work or reduced working hours at times. This is also evidenced by Graph 8 which shows no community-based staff working full-time hours across the WTA and early-stage delivery phases.

The high average hours worked in 2021 and early 2022 (without staff numbers increasing) primarily related to intensive COVID-19 support. During this period, Children's Ground received funding and donations dedicated to supporting communities to know about and respond to COVID-19. This included increased funding for staff resources. Through this period, community staff worked increased hours as they supported families and households with COVID-19 health promotion (as described further on in the Family health outcome section).

As described throughout the process evaluation section of this report, Children's Ground provides extensive tailored and general employment support and training for all staff. Both staff and community members engage in employment support and training. For community members who are not employed with Children's Ground, such support includes becoming employment-ready, even if they do not become employed at the time.

From 2020 to 2024, 44 First Nations staff and community members engaged in employment support, and 30 people engaged in training and professional development. This includes First Nations staff not from the three Children's Ground communities.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations community-based staff reported that Children's Ground created culturally safe, flexible jobs that encouraged community members to work in roles that aligned with their strengths, cultural and family responsibilities.

Staff reported this enabled access to employment and, for some staff, increased engagement and consistency in employment. For staff who had never or rarely been in paid employment, or who had not worked for many years, this was reportedly a significant change, both as individuals and for their family. Financial stability from employment was also noted by some staff, who also connected this to improved family wellbeing.

Staff consistently reported feeling proud, confident and empowered by their roles at Children's Ground, as well as their employment contributing to overcoming or reducing personal challenges with mental health and wellbeing, as well as grief and learning healthy habits. Some staff reported having a renewed sense of purpose and that their employment with Children's Ground had positively impacted their self-confidence and mental health.

In evaluation interviews, community-based staff reported:

"And then like, working with children, and it made me feel more comfortable, and I put my sadness aside and I just had to be strong for the kids, for my nephew and nieces and grandkids. When I stepped in, that was, I think 2021 I started working, right up until now."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"I feel like especially when I would stay at home gambling and things, so I say, "Oh, I might get the job." They changed my attitude, I've stopped gambling... Yeah, I come every day here. Sometimes I go back, have a rest, rest my brain, sleep early, take my little one to school, come back. Yeah, everything's changed now for me."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"It makes me feel like I'm stepping up, I've stepped up, and I'm proud of working with the kids, working for the kids. When I go travelling and come back, and then I hear the parents, 'Oh, you did a good job going out and travelling, and try to make our community get better, stronger.' So I feel really proud when a parent comes up to me and say that, and I'm doing it for the kids anyway."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"It just brings, you know, stability in your family, brings pride, and then once you start working and you buy things, it brings ownership."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

First Nations community-based staff reported ripple effects of employment on families. They reported people being role models for children and young people in employment aspirations.

"It'll be like – [a young person from the community] will be a good role model for the younger ones in the community for the future."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"So they can get more experience how adults, how they're doing. Keep them [children and young people] motivated when they grow up. Like they say, 'I can do that.'"

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Yes, so they can have the idea that you've got to get a job when you get big. It's good for you, and you need to provide and things for your family."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

In evaluation interviews with local service providers, people referred to community employment as a strength of Children's Ground, with one service noting that this distinguishes Children's Ground from other organisations.



Three service providers interviewed stated:

"I mean even just by having [a community member] on board [employed]. It's a local community person. Makes a big difference in community engagement."

"Growing the Aboriginal people within the community for that responsibility of their children, of work, etc."

"Yeah, we've probably experienced that first-hand, I want to say about [a young community employee]. Yeah, it works in partnership with our delivery onsite there, and we've sort of been a part of that growth from her initial involvement in the development, and we've certainly seen that continue to grow and develop ... again, a perfect example of you guys employing somebody directly from community, so they can be involved in what that process looks like and have a voice in what that development looks like, as well as then delivering and providing an opportunity in that space."

Local service providers, 2024

Community staff and family members also reported areas for improvement in employment. A prevalent theme was the need for Children's Ground to employ more community-based staff, including more male staff. One person reported needing more training, but a few reported that Children's Ground needs to provide more training and support opportunities for young people.

"I need more training as well... I want to gain more experience and get a certificate and stuff for my future so I can get a job when I go back home... Because I've been here for six years, I don't even have a certificate from working here."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Want to see the younger ones [young people] get involved because they [young children] love the younger families coming in, working alongside them. Not just at home. But it's good for the babies to see the younger ones come in and work... We like to see them [young people] coming into governance, getting involved. We need more of that training and stuff [for young people]... male staff, too, for the services, and not just woman working. Because there's men they need to help too, in families."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Summary of progress

This Contribution Case evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground's flexible, no-barriers employment model has been a significant enabler for community-based employment, including engaging people that had little and no history of paid employment.

Increasing economic opportunities within each community has reportedly resulted in people feeling proud with increased confidence in employment and speaking up, using their voice. For some community staff, their employment has positively impacted their personal and family circumstances.

Community-based employment has enabled community governance and leadership and contributed to increased engagement in health promotion for whole families and child engagement in early learning.

Increasing community-based employment, including employing more men, is a key priority for each community, this can be achieved as resources for employment, workforce development and employment support become available.

Most Significant Change story

This second story relates to the following long-term outcomes for families:

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

"They care."

– 35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

My name is Samara. I've got kids in my care: Arthur, Joan and Verna and I've been with Children's Ground from the start. I've seen a lot change since they came here. Before, we didn't have much help. We were doing things on our own. But now, things are better. A lot better.

Children's Ground helped me with health stuff. When I didn't have a phone to make appointments at the clinic, they helped me from the office. They helped me talk when I couldn't speak English much. They gave us cleaning stuff, special shampoo for skin, and even took us to the clinic in their bus. That helped a lot. My kids had health problems before, but now they're good. No more hospital, no more medicine.

During COVID, Children's Ground was the only mob that helped us. They brought masks, helped with vaccines, gave us food, even helped with power cards. They came to check on us, asked if we were okay. No other service did that. Just Children's Ground.

When I've got worries, feeling down, stressed, or problems at home; they come and talk to me. They ask how I'm doing. I tell them what's wrong, and they help. They tell me, "Don't take out the stress too much, just be happy, talk to your neighbour." That helps. It really does.

They also help with the kids' learning. My kids learned to wash hands, brush teeth, clean up after themselves. They even help cook now. They learn that at Children's Ground, and they do it at home too. They use manners, they know how to look after sores, put band-aids, all that. It's good.

Children's Ground helped with school too. My kids wanted to go to this one school, but it was full. So, Children's Ground called another school and got them in. They helped with enrolment, and before that, they did learning here [at Children's Ground] and reading and counting. Now my kids can count better. They also help with cultural stuff. They take kids out bush, teach them about bush medicine, bush food. They ask us what we eat when we're sick, what we take from the land. We show them. We learn from each other. Kids learn, parents learn, everyone learns together. Sometimes they ask us where we want to go; beach, bush, or Fogg Dam and they take us. We feel heard. We feel like we've got a voice. That makes me happy.

I've got nieces and nephews who want to work with Children's Ground. We've been asking since last year. We want to teach kids about hunting, bush medicine, dancing. I want to work too, but I've got injuries from a car accident. Still, I help out when I can, cleaning up, talking to kids, joining in. Children's Ground respects our culture. They ask about ceremony dancing, language, kinship. They wait when we've got Sorry Business. They understand. That means a lot. Before Children's Ground, parents didn't spend much time with kids. Now, they do. We go out together, do activities, learn together. It's better now. A lot better.

Children's Ground is good. They help more than anyone else. They listen. They care. They make us feel strong.

Why was this story selected?

The First Nations Selection Group identified this as the most significant in health because it focuses on her kids and says that parents are also getting health support, but we need more health support for families.

This story said everything, like kids' health, she has seen a lot of changes, she talks about the school stuff, COVID stuff, helping her kids getting into school. During COVID it was hard getting around and Children's Ground helped her with COVID and the vaccines instead of her getting out of the community. So, Children's Ground helped her with that. She also speaks about Children's Ground teaching kids how to wash hands, brush teeth and health routine. It covers everything we do with health, taking the kids out to Country, showing which bush medicine to get and bush food to eat. Also teaching them when someone passes away, to be home for Sorry Business, let the teachers know too. Teaching them how to do ceremony, dancing and language.

Family Outcome: Families are healthy and socially strong

Contribution: Families have increased engagement in their health and wellbeing and have increased access to health services

Progress measures (health):

- 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.[108]

Before Children's Ground

No communities reported engaging with health promotion.

All three communities reported that there was not consistent and sustained health (or other) service/program delivery in their community.

Two communities reported local health services visiting their community on occasions. Community members reported that visits were irregular and transport to clinics was unreliable, with inconsistent and limited pick-up services at times.

The third community reported having an accessible local health clinic, within an approx. 10–20-minute walk.

Children's Ground's holistic and integrated approach enables families to engage with health promotion and support for a range of reasons.

From 2022 to 2024, the most prevalent 'reasons for health engagement' were as follows:

- Nutrition
- Social/Emotional wellbeing promotion
- Food security
- Housing: hygiene, overcrowding, access/security, safety
- Infant health postnatally
- Maternal health: During pregnancy and postnatally
- Skin health
- Immunisation/vaccination
- Family worries
- Heart health
- Diabetes
- Anxiety or depression
- Ear health
- Community environments and safety: hygiene, rubbish removal, infrastructure
- Pre-pregnancy sexual health and wellbeing
- Eye health
- Respiratory issues
- COVID-19 planning, testing support, vaccinations *(see Box 4 for further information about COVID-19 health promotion and support)*
- Kidney/renal health
- Medication support
- Power/electricity security
- Dental health
- Elder support
- Family grief and loss, including funeral support
- Family violence: experienced, witnessed
- Alcohol issues
- Anaemia
- Cultural/Spiritual ill health and loss
- Community conflict/violence
- Sexual health & illness

108. Note: This also relates to the long-term outcome of 'The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity', for which the early-stage progress measures are as follows: 1) Community has increased access to economic and employment opportunities; 2) Community engaged in economic opportunities

Box 4: COVID-19 health promotion and support

During Children's Ground's WTA community engagement phase and in early-stage delivery, the uncertainty of COVID-19 saw this become a significant health priority for all three communities.

In response, Children's Ground undertook COVID-19 planning with each interested household and provided targeted health promotion and support as requested.

289 people engaged in COVID health promotion, education and support during the WTA and early-stage delivery (2020 to 2024).

Staff/family members noted the types of support provided by Children's Ground, including receiving packages of food, hygiene supplies, masks, testing, support, health and COVID education and information, and immunisation support.

Staff/families reported that Children's Ground's presence during this time built trust, safety and demonstrated its reliability. People reported that the consistency of Children's Ground's presence during this time reduced some of the fear and anxiety related to what COVID-19 was and how their family and household could keep safe.

"During the [COVID-19] lockdown and yeah, Children's Ground was very supportive with everyone in the community... Support with food, and going to the clinic, and stuff like that... They bring out like them COVID tests and stuff. And masks. And they left it [COVID tests] in the kitchen fridge like for anyone who want to do testing."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"We secured food security from CG. Each house got a $60 meat pack... They've got all the cleaning products, got canned foods."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024



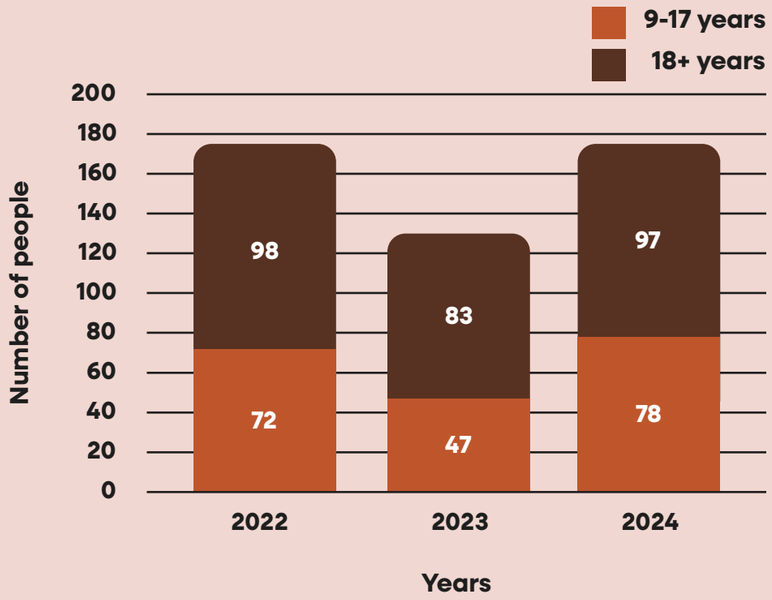


This demonstrates the diversity of health and wellbeing support people are seeking to engage with through Children's Ground. Data relating to engagement in health and wellbeing, reflects these and other less prevalent health promotion and support areas.

Health promotion and support

From 2022 to 2024, 393 family members engaged with universal and targeted health promotion, including 142 young people (aged 9–17 years) and 251 adults (aged 18+ years). Graph 9 shows the number of family members engaged in health promotion and support in each year of early-stage delivery.

Graph 9: Number of family members engaged in health promotion and support, by year



This data demonstrates that many young people and adult family members are engaging in universal and targeted health promotion, increasing health literacy in whole families and households. Coupled with health literacy young people and adults are also engaging with through early years and after-hours learning sessions, this is contributing to health, wellbeing and illness management, as well as health literacy and healthy behaviours.

As reported previously by some families, the healthy routines embedded in early learning sessions are translating into the home environment. The health literacy of young people and adults within families and households contributes to and reinforces children health literacy and behaviours.

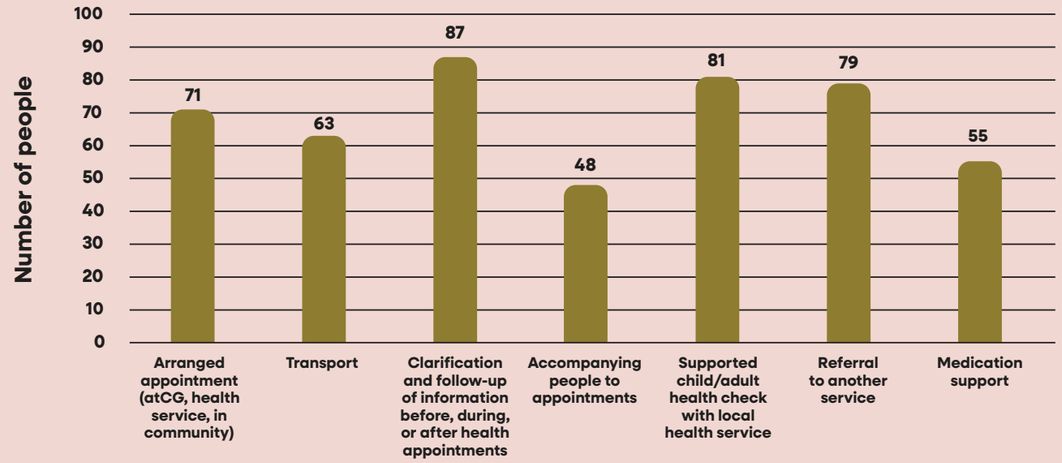
The decrease in 2023 engagement is due to the one community that decided to pause delivery of the CG Approach to return to WTA community engagement as the priority. It is also due to Health staff recruitment and retention challenges experienced in 2023.

The increase in 2024 engagement was a result of the community re-establishing and growing delivery of the CG Approach with children and families, as well as all three communities increasing delivery of after-hours activities with integrated health promotion. An additional Family Support Services (FSS) staff member was also funded in 2024, contributing to increased health and wellbeing staff resources.

In addition to health promotion and support delivered by Children's Ground, a key element of Children's Ground's family health delivery is supporting families to access local clinical health services. From experiences of implementing the CG Approach in three different regions across the NT, families have consistently requested support to access local clinical health services. Therefore, providing supported access to clinical health has been a priority.

From 2022 to 2024, 146 people were supported to engage with clinical and other health services. Graph 10 presents the number of people across all age groups engaged in different types of support.

Graph 10: Number of people (all ages) engaged in support to access clinical health



This data demonstrates a high need for reducing access barriers to clinical health services, as requested by families. For some families, initial support to engage with local services is sufficient, and people continue to engage with health services without support. However, for some families, consistent support is requested, particularly where people are required to navigate multiple services for themselves and their children.

Some families highlighted the long-standing role of the local clinic in supporting their family with transport to access health services. From staff/family reports, Children's Ground has complemented existing health service delivery and provided an important bridge between families and clinical health services for those not accessing clinical health.



In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members reported increased health literacy and increased access to clinical and other health services, through support from Children's Ground to navigate. Some staff/families reported that Children's Ground offered important support to reduce barriers to health service access by facilitating and coordinating in-community visits from health organisations as well as transport to local health services when needed for clinic visits. Others highlighted some occasions of transport to collect medication, bush medicine and power card top-ups which are critical to environmental health and wellbeing.

With the limitations of the growth model, it was not expected that families would report significant health changes. While some people did report positive health changes, most families talked about accessing health support and the type of support they engaged with through Children's Ground.

"Yeah, my health has improved. [Another person from the community]'s feeling a lot better now, she used to get support with going to the clinic and stuff."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Yeah, well, I mean, I've gone through depression and anxiety and high blood pressure and all sorts of things. If it wasn't for Children's Ground, I probably wouldn't have had it all under control right now. Just getting out to the clinic and having that support, having somebody by my side so I didn't feel like I was alone. It's really good."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Usually Danila see the kids, but I have had Children's Ground help me access the clinic for my own medical reasons."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Children's Ground communicate with Danila Dilba. Children's Ground help them with arranging appointments and stuff like that, or with transport... And Danila Dilba gets in touch with Children's Ground to let them know that they're coming out for check-ups... [we have] barbeque at the same time. And on a separate occasion, they come around for checking ears."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"[With Children's Ground support] I've always got another person's perspective on certain things. Somebody else might notice something that I haven't noticed. It makes it a lot easier... It's given me confidence. It's helped me believe in myself and my own judgement, so it's awesome."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"I reckon I feel a lot more confident that I'd be able to reach out to the right people [health services] for the right things now... and who to ask about what certain things."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"To make [health clinic] appointment. They help us talk when we can't talk English much."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"Having other women that I can go over there and speak to has been really good as well. Meeting all the new Children's Ground workers and being able to just have somebody support-wise to speak to and talk to who I can get other support from around Darwin."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

For First Nations staff/family members engaged with Children's Ground Family Support Services program delivery most people interviewed reported finding the support helpful. People reported the FSS team supporting people with housing, maternal and child health and other needs, attending appointments, as well as support with Centrelink and food security through transport to shops.

One First Nations community staff member referred to the diverse preventative and support work of the FSS team.

"Yeah, helping them with their health or sanitary stuff, or something to do with their baby, with their kids...

Mothers with new bubs, they help support the mothers before pregnancy and after pregnancy...

They support families with health, and with their food shopping. They're taking them to Centrelink and stuff, helping them out...

Or helping them with household, where they can take them to get their electrical stuff, whatever they need for the house."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Families not engaged with FSS were not aware of the team's work and support.

While Children's Ground has reportedly contributed to the health and wellbeing of many families, some reported that they do not typically seek support from Children's Ground for their health concerns. This is consistent with findings reported in previous sections with some First Nations family members reporting not being aware the Children's Ground provides holistic health promotion and support. This is most likely the result of limited resources for extensive and broad community engagement.

Many staff/family members interviewed reported wanting increased health support from Children's Ground, as well as wanting more health services delivered in their community regularly. Some people reported wanting support with addressing alcohol-related issues in the community, improving health literacy in the community in general, more health promotion in early years learning. Importantly, some people also reported wanting health promotion materials in Aboriginal languages.

One participant noted they only seek Children's Ground's support when staff are present in the community. This demonstrates the importance of place-based in-community delivery with integrated delivery teams based at community hubs/centres in each community.

Collectively, Children's Ground and local clinical health services are contributing to reduced access barriers and increasing active and empowered engagement in health management. However, increased delivery is required to respond to community priorities and to see significantly improved health outcomes in the short- and long-term.

Social and emotional wellbeing promotion and support

SEWB promotion is integrated into early years learning sessions by learning and health promotion staff. Children's Ground employed a SEWB counsellor/practitioner to work with staff, children, young people and adults.

Recruitment and retention of a specialist SEWB counsellor/practitioner role in Darwin has proved to be one of the more challenging specialist workforce positions to secure. Access to and continuity of individual and family-based counselling was impacted during staff changes and recruitment delays. This dedicated position was ceased due to funding reductions towards the end of 2024. Following this, a generalist health promotion and wellbeing position provided some SEWB support. The FSS team also provided SEWB support to families in the course of their early intervention support with families.

In addition to this, all Children's Ground delivery staff provide informal SEWB support in different ways. While not trained counsellors, this data is captured because, due to the relational nature of the CG Approach, families often share their worries or concerns with staff with whom they have a strong and/or longstanding relationship. When this occurs, if required, people are then supported to engage with a SEWB counsellor/practitioner and/or referred to a relevant mental health service.

From 2022 to 2024, the most prevalent 'reasons for health engagement' were as follows:

- Family worries
- Anxiety and depression
- Funeral support
- Family violence: experienced, witnessed and perpetrated
- Cultural/spiritual ill health and loss
- Family grief and loss
- Community conflict/violence
- Alcohol and drug issues
- Child behaviour: self-regulation, attention to learning, social issues
- Physical ill-health
- Homelessness
- Child abuse/neglect
- Suicidal behaviour
- Sexual health relationships and planning

From 2022 to 2024, 264 family members engaged with SEWB promotion and support, including 101 young people (aged 9–17 years) and 163 adults (aged 18+ years).

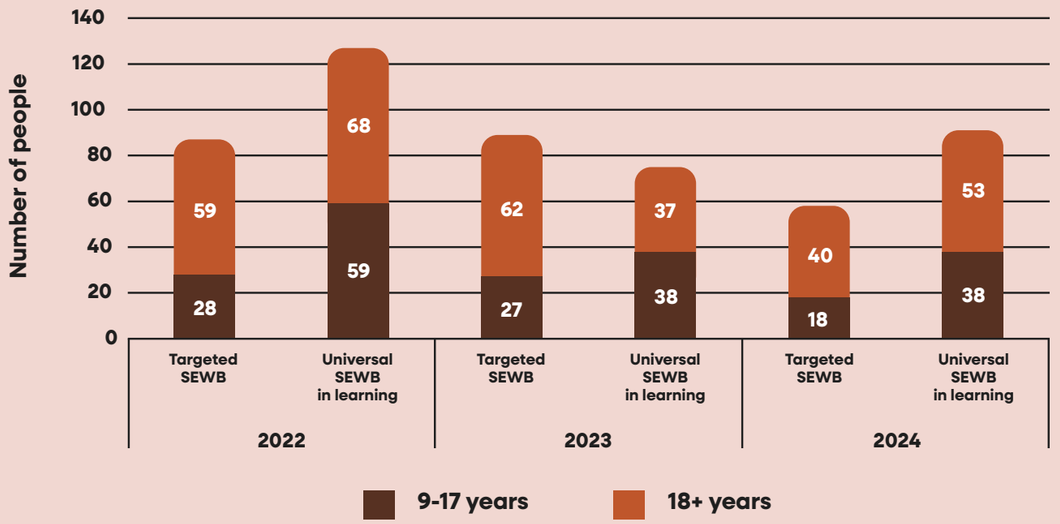
Within this, 44 people engaged with individual and family-based counselling with Children's Ground's SEWB counsellors/practitioners, including 15 young people (aged 9–17 years) and 29 adults (aged 18+ years).

Graph 11 shows the number of people engaged with social/emotional wellbeing promotion and support integrated into early years and after-hours learning (universal) and the number of people who received support from delivery staff or the SEWB practitioners.

While SEWB promotion and support have been limited across all elements of the CG Approach, data shows that in each year of early-stage delivery, young people and adults have actively engaged with the social/emotional wellbeing support and promotion that has been available, both within and outside of learning sessions.

The SEWB promotion and support that has been delivered across the CG Approach has seen some families engage in activities that promote SEWB and build emotional literacy, some with individual or family-based counselling, and some people supported with navigating the local mental health service system.

Graph 11: Number of family members engaged in social/emotional wellbeing promotion and support, by year



Due to the relational nature of Children's Ground delivery and challenges with SEWB practitioner continuity, in evaluation interviews, many First Nations staff/family members reported receiving informal emotional support from Children's Ground staff, also noting that engaging with Children's Ground activities helped manage stress and worry at times.

"Yeah, when I don't feel like talking to anyone, they [Children's Ground] come and they ask me how I'm doing, and I sort of talk to them, tell them what's wrong with me at home. Yeah, they help me."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Well, even just getting to the right person to speak to, how I was feeling, was really helpful. I didn't even know who to go and see about it, and I was having full blown panic attacks. Going and seeing the doctor and telling them about how I feel and getting on that right medication has really helped me. I don't have panic attacks anymore. I feel so much better about myself. I wouldn't have known who to go see or speak to about it if I didn't have that support from Children's Ground. It's really helped me out."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024



In evaluation interviews, most people reported not engaging with targeted SEWB support with Children's Ground's SEWB practitioner.

First Nations staff/family members reported changes that can improve SEWB support. These included increasing the delivery of SEWB counselling in safe and comfortable environments, and in small activity-based group sessions. It was also reported that there needs to be an increased focus on children's SEWB.

Young women's groups

As noted in Section 4.2, principle 'Start early', Children's Ground has supported female First Nations staff to establish Women's and Young Women's groups which focus on SEWB and physical health, with young women's groups also focusing on sexual health and positive intimate partner relationships. These groups have been small in number and been delivered both frequently and in-frequently at times during early-stage delivery of the CG Approach.

From 2022 to 2024, in addition to the 23 young girls/women aged 9–17 years participated in Young Women's Groups, 15 female adults (18+ years) engaged in Women's Groups.

Many staff/family members talked about how Women's Groups and Young Women's sessions provided safe spaces for connection, creativity and emotional support. They described these sessions as opportunities to bond, teach children and young people, and feel part of the community. It was also noted that these sessions were important places to talk with young women about women's cultural health practices as well as sexual health promotion and positive partner relationships.

"Well I know when [a Children's Ground staff member] was working with us she did a lot of talking to girls about healthy growth, body growth and yeah … I was looking towards that because the girls are growing and, yeah and we did a lot of activities in the group like, the cycles and stuff like that."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"We learnt about our body parts and healthy stuff… And like sometimes we learn about like what alcohol and drugs can affect you… Yeah, and women's health as well. [Did you find that useful?], Yeah, it was very useful."

15-20 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"So I'm just doing my little arts and crafts and having yarns with them [young girls/women], what they're feeling, social and emotional. Just talk about themselves, and they tell me all their stories and they laugh. It's good to hear all the old people's stories."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Little women's packs and stuff. That was good 'cause then at the end of the day they could take it home… and there was a lot of talking about it as well, about when they will expect it, who will they talk to about it? Stuff like that."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Engagement of young women is critical in prevention, contributing to sexual health, maternal and child health, healthy women, prevention of family violence and the promotion of mental health, cultural and social health.

Some First Nations staff/family members reported the need to establish Men's/Boys' Groups to support their SEWB as well. As one person reported:

"Children's Ground should employ a male and that person should form up a men's group. We've got a lot of men here. They need someone to work there [at Children's Ground] so they can take the men out fishing, do activities, cutting didgeridoo and making spears."

45-50 years, male, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024



Cultural health and wellbeing

As per community priorities outlined in Section 3, families want to engage with cultural health and wellbeing medicines and practices. This was consistent among many staff and family members interviewed.

From 2022 to 2024, 340 people of all ages engaged in cultural health and wellbeing practices, as shown in Graph 12.

While adults and young people have been engaging in cultural health and wellbeing practices, this was mostly during early years and after-hours learning sessions. There were no dedicated funding resources for cultural health practitioners during the evaluation period.

Knowledge of and access to in-depth cultural health practices remains a focus for each community to plan and grow as and when they can. As noted in the MSC story, children and families are engaging in cultural learning together, learning from each other. This is part of the cultural strengthening and revitalisation occurring within each community.

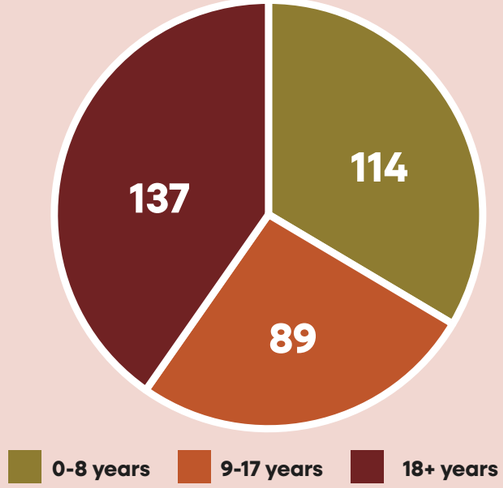
While there are families who hold some cultural knowledge teaching the children, young people and other adults, it has been noted throughout this report that communities have experienced challenges with engaging Elders, and cultural authorities and knowledge holders. This is particularly knowledge holders across the diverse language and family groups within each community. However, first language and cultural teaching, learning and health practices is a key priority and focus of families and Children's Ground.

Before Children's Ground

All three communities reported some cultural learning occurred at home, and that no organisations were supporting cultural learning opportunities.

One community reported families are living on their Country in their Darwin community.

Graph 12: Number of people engaged in cultural health and wellbeing practices, by age





Summary of progress

The Contribution Case evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground is engaging families in both universal and targeted health, including health promotion, literacy and prevention, as well as health support for responses to and management of ill-health. Children's Ground is also working with and supporting families to engage with local clinical health and other services.

Family engagement in health, including SEWB, means that people of all ages in families and household engage together with consistent health promotion. This has established health and wellbeing as a priority for all ages, while reinforcing child health literacy and healthy behaviours.

With Children's Ground still in the early stages of resourcing and embedding SEWB extensively across all elements of the CG Approach, it has been positive to see active family engagement in SEWB promotion and support, particularly with the staff retention and recruitment challenges experienced.

The CG Approach Health & Wellbeing platform, including SEWB, are delivery areas that require increased resourcing to enable increased delivery to achieve broader individual and family engagement in health promotion and support.

Family engagement in health, including SEWB, is also contributing to, supporting and reinforcing child health literacy and healthy behaviours, with people of all ages in families and household engaging together with consistent promotion.

The delivery of western and cultural health responses is enabling families to access both knowledge systems. However, further planning and work is required to embed and strengthen access to cultural health and wellbeing knowledge and practices. This will also contribute to the foundation for achieving the community level outcome of 'The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural wellbeing'.

Family Outcome: Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development

Contribution: Family members (young people and adults) are increasing positive engagement with children and with their community.

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.

Before Children's Ground

One community reported that community events and celebrations were held on some occasions.

Both of the MSC stories presented in this Family Outcome section refer to parents engaging with their children in learning and health, and undertaking community engagement to bring new families into Children's Ground delivery and employment. These are examples of how Children's Ground provides opportunities for whole families to engage in positive, empowering and supportive environments, as well as opportunities for families to engage with their children's learning, health and wellbeing. Policies established by First Nations leaders include learning sessions that must be intergenerational, and for cultural safety children should have a family member present.

In addition, community events and celebrations have been held throughout the WTA and early-stage delivery periods. All events focused on broad engagement of children and families in positive and safe, social and enjoyable events and environments. Some were targeted community engagement strategies and others celebrated special days, such as NAIDOC day and Christmas parties.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members reported that since Children's Ground started there have been increased activities and opportunities for families to engage with their community and spend time together with their children, particularly through early learning sessions, after-hours activities and community events. However, some reported that there had been a similar number of activities, but more family engagement.

"There was nothing happening [in community], it was dead."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"There's more activities when Children's Ground came into the community."

30-35 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

"We get to see fun stuff. They put movie nights for us, breakfast every Wednesday. And they tell parents to join them... I tell the other parents to go with them... [It's] fun."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/family member, 2024

Throughout early-stage delivery, 202 adult family members (18+ years) engaged in learning and health alongside their children.

In addition to this, 289 people of all ages engaged in community events and celebrations. This included: 104 children (0–5 years); 75 young people (9–17 years); and 139 adults (18+ years).

Many staff/family members referred to Children's Ground as a safe place for everyone involved. This has contributed to families feeling comfortable and safe to engage initially and subsequently continue their engagement with Children's Ground.

High adult engagement in early learning saw many children engage in learning alongside their parents and family members, however, this was not the case for all children. Most staff/family members interviewed reported that some parents are not always actively engaging in early learning alongside their children. However, some people reported that parents are engaging, although inconsistently.

High levels of family engagement were achieved within the context of the growth model limitations, however, all three communities have continuously identified increasing family engagement as one of their top priorities.

"Trying to get more parents come with their toddlers, to bring them for early years. Last year we had quite a few, but like this year were starting to drop maybe a couple. Maybe five or six. Sometimes it was down to one or two... Need more support for the adults. In that way they can attend regularly more with their kids."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"We can be present more in community. More place-based. So community can have familiar faces, not just with community staff, you know."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"We need to do more engagement with the families. Not only the children, but the families of the children, like the grandfather, grandmother, mummy, daddy, whatever. Yeah, we need to engage more with the families."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

"Not much family going... You only have [name of a family group] family, and [another family group], and [another family group], but these other mob, they don't participate because no one is there for them [employed by Children's Ground]. We need that other person from that group."

60-65 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Consistent with what staff/family members have reported about other areas of the CG Approach, people want more engagement of families and more opportunities for families to engage with their children's learning, health and community.

Some parents, particularly those employed with Children's Ground, consistently engaged with their community and alongside their children in learning sessions and events. For these parents, their active engagement in community governance, leadership and employment has provided opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the CG Approach and long-term strategy. This reportedly contributed to consistent engagement.

Some First Nations staff referred to low parental engagement potentially being due to personal and/or family challenges and circumstances. This demonstrates the need for increased consistency in place-based delivery, for extensive delivery of family health promotion and support (including embedding social/ emotional wellbeing promotion and support across the CG Approach), as well as increased community-based employment to broaden the reach and engagement of families to respond to their needs and to reduce access and engagement barriers.

Summary of progress

The Contribution Case evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has effectively engaged children, young people and families in positive, safe and intergenerational environments, increasing the extent to which families are engaged in their community and walking alongside their children. This provided opportunities for people to engage with services for positive reasons, rather than because they have 'problems/issues' to address. This was often a soft entry point, leading to engagement in other areas of the CG Approach when people felt safe, comfortable and confident.

Employment with Children's Ground has been a significant driver of consistent family engagement in learning, community events and health promotion and support. This reinforces the need for increased community-based employment across all language and family groups.

In the highly colonised and mobile Darwin environment and populations, it was anticipated that engaging diverse family and language groups in events and celebrations could be slow to establish and build. This was the case, however, reports from First Nations staff and family members about Children's Ground as a safe place has been important for enabling and encouraging engagement. This is an important foundation for building on the social, cultural and economic capital with communities – which also relates to the Community level outcomes of 'The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural, social and economic wellbeing' and 'The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity'.





Alternative explanations for contribution

The evaluation information collected from communities about service access, service engagement, family engagement and community development has provided an understanding of the contribution Children's Ground has made to the Family level outcomes.

Children's Ground has been the only organisation consistently employing local community members and providing extensive integrated health and wellbeing services to support people's ongoing engagement in employment. Therefore, the reported employment outcomes have resulted from Children's Ground's employment opportunities and holistic and enabling employment support. No other organisations were reported as providing holistic health promotion and practical support that extended beyond traditional health service models and delivery, particularly in areas such as environmental health, nutrition and food security, etc. The evaluation evidence shows that Children's Ground was the primary contributor to child, young people and adult engagement in health promotion and support.

Local health clinics were acknowledged by communities for their long-standing contributions to health and wellbeing, including support with transport and appointments (primarily for children and Elders) and periods of time delivering clinical health in communities. However, some people noted a reduced presence of clinical health services in the community before Children's Ground started. The evaluation evidence demonstrates that increased access to clinical health was achieved by Children's Ground in partnership with local health services.

From evaluation interviews with First Nations staff/family members, Children's Ground delivery staff and local services, it was evident that no other organisations were supporting in-community delivery of family-based activities. Therefore, Children's Ground was the most significant contributor to the reported increased family engagement in community and with children.

Summary of early change and impact with families

The Contribution Case evidence demonstrates significantly improved employment outcomes for individuals (and their family) employed with Children's Ground, particularly for people who had never previously been in paid employment. Employment has led to improved economic stability, increased child and family engagement in early years and after-hours learning, and increased engagement in positive social environments, with families engaging alongside children.

All communities identified increased community-based employment as a key priority and enabler for child and family engagement, community governance, cultural teaching and learning – and importantly to achieve more widespread whole-of-community engagement.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground's health delivery has contributed to improving health access and literacy for some families, particularly families with adults employed with Children's Ground. This included complementing and working with existing health services by providing a bridge and connection to clinical health services. However, this increasing health delivery was identified as an opportunity for growth and improvement with some families not being aware of Children's Ground's health promotion and support.

Children's Ground's whole-of-family approach to health and wellbeing has seen young people and adults engaging in health promotion alongside children, contributing to reinforcing the children's health literacy, particularly in relation to healthy behaviours translating from Children's Ground learning sessions into home environments.

Evaluation evidence shows that some progress has been made in engaging children, young people and families in positive social environments, within early years and after-hours learning and community events. This is particularly important in communities where high population mobility can impact opportunities to build positive relationships and social cohesion between families.

Increased engagement of children, young people and families across the CG Approach has been identified as a key priority for all communities, with a focus on engaging men and people from each of the language and family groups within communities.

Progress in family engagement with children and the community has made an important contribution to building social and cultural capital within communities over time.



Change and impact for Communities

In Darwin communities, First Nations people speak to the ongoing racism, injustice and pain that manifests in their everyday lives. The disproportionate incarceration, and high rates of social and emotional distress manifests in a range of serious risks including family violence, overcrowding, poverty, suicide and complex challenges for many First Nations people, as these outcomes are interconnected and driven by structural disadvantage, trauma and inequitable access to services.[109] [110] [111] [112] These are not indicators of community weakness; rather, they are consequences of systemic racism, colonisation and the ongoing denial of cultural authority and human rights, which continue to shape health, social and justice outcomes.

To break through complex and entrenched disadvantage across whole populations, the CG Approach builds on the social, cultural and economic capital within each community, consistent with strengths-based and Indigenous-led frameworks that emphasise community capability, cultural strengths and local leadership as key drivers of improved outcomes.[113] [114] [115]

Children's Ground's ultimate aim is to implement and evidence systemic reform that can achieve equity, justice and wellbeing at a whole-of-community level over the course of a generation (25 years). Only communities themselves can design and lead systems reform that will change the future for the next generation.

The short- and medium-term strategy is to support families to provide the environments children need to thrive. It will take at least a generation of children (alongside their family) to grow up experiencing equity across key determinants for lifelong wellbeing.

Children's Ground has key indicators for change that will be tracked over the 25 years. At this early stage, change at a community level is not expected. However, it is expected that the foundations and building blocks for long-term change are being established over the first years of implementing the CG Approach – primarily through progress in Child and Family level outcomes.

Figure 15: Short-term progress indicators contributing to long-term outcomes for communities



With community-level impact only being realised over the long-term, this section is not presented by each community outcome. Rather, it presents a summary of Contribution Case evaluation evidence drawn from the process evaluation (ten principles) and the Child and Family level outcomes and the community context for achieving long-term outcomes

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110. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). *Australia's welfare 2023: In brief* (Cat. No. AUS 245).
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112. Krieg, A. (2006). Aboriginal incarceration: Health and social impacts. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 184(10), 534–536.
113. Dudgeon, P., Milroy, H., & Walker, R. (Eds.). (2014). *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (2nd ed.). Commonwealth of Australia.
114. Martin, G., Lovelock, K., & Stevenson, B. (2023). *An overview of Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention in Australia*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. https://doi.org/10.25816/gv9g-ge98
115. Fogarty, W., Lovell, M., Langenberg, J., & Heron, M.-J. (2018). *Deficit discourse and strengths-based approaches*. Lowitja Institute.

Most Significant Change story

This section includes a Most Significant Change story that relates to all three long-term community level outcomes.

“This is ours.”

– 45-50 years, female, First Nations staff member, 2024

When I first joined Children’s Ground in 2022, I was coming out of a tough time, grief, loss and health struggles. I’d left my previous job and was looking for something that felt right. When I saw the job ad for Children’s Ground, it spoke to me. Being a First Nations person from the stolen generation background, for me, their principles, their approach – it was how I’d always worked, how I’d always lived. I knew I had to be part of it.

It’s been a journey over 3 years; one filled with growth, leadership and deep relationships.

The most significant change I’ve seen is about the children.

When I look back over the last few years, what stands out most is the shift in how kids see their community. Before, it was just houses. Now, it’s ‘our community’. There’s pride. Ownership. Safety. Kids know this is their place. They feel it. They live it.

I’ve seen it in the way they show up to celebrations, how they talk about their homes, how they play together. I’ve got goosebumps just thinking about it. These kids are growing up with a sense of togetherness that wasn’t there before. And that’s going to shape the future – a new generation that sees community not as a collection of families, but as a united whole.

And it’s not just the kids. Families feel supported. They know someone cares. They’re accessing services, building confidence and stepping into leadership. I’ve watched people grow stronger, more articulate, more empowered. Their growth ripples out to their families, creating a domino effect of strength and stability.

Children’s Ground didn’t just bring programs. It brought a way of working that honours culture, builds trust and puts community in the driver’s seat. We’re not just delivering services – we’re changing systems, setting the bar for how First Nations communities should be engaged.

And that pride, that sense of “this is ours”, that’s the most powerful change of all.

Why was this story selected?

This story was selected for its powerful reflection of pride, ownership and identity within the community. It captures how children and families feel a deep connection to Children’s Ground – not as an external service, but as something they own and belong to. The children know: “This is ours. Children’s Ground is us. Without us, there is no Children’s Ground.” It speaks to the sense of support and care families experience, knowing they have access to the buildings and spaces, and that they are truly theirs.

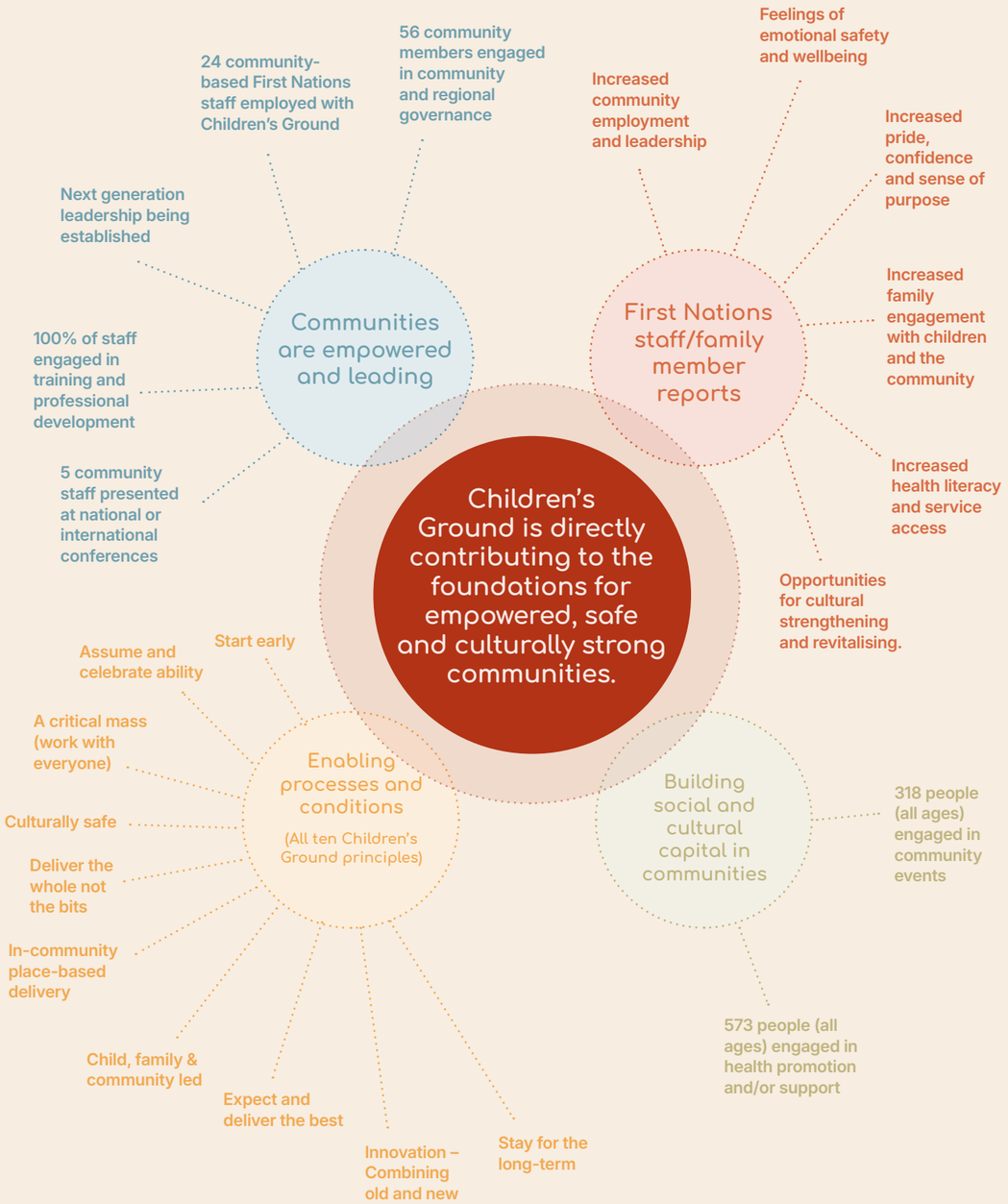
This feeling of ownership fosters trust, empowerment and a strong sense of community. The story also highlights the vital role Children’s Ground plays as a bridge between the community and other organisations. When external services come in, the community looks to Children’s Ground to be the trusted intermediary, ensuring that engagement is respectful, culturally safe and community-led.

As a Most Significant Change story, it does not represent the experience of all communities engaged with the Children’s Ground at this early stage. This story demonstrates the impact of early engagement with Children’s Ground for some and the potential it holds for all communities as the Approach strengthens.

Contribution: Children’s Ground has empowered communities to lead planning, engagement and delivery of services that respond to their priorities and aspirations.

Figure 16 summarises evaluation evidence from the process evaluation (ten principles) and the Child and Family level outcomes to demonstrates progress made in building the foundations for long-term community level change and impact.

Figure 16: Children’s Ground’s contribution to early change and impact for communities



Community context: Strengths, worries, trauma and aspirations

Across all three communities leading the CG Approach, persistent injustice and structural racism and disadvantage prevails. Many experience complex and multiple levels of stress and trauma.

Children's Ground recognises the oppressive and disempowering impact of colonisation on First Nations peoples, which takes shape in many different forms, including their rights to govern their own affairs. Historical experiences include ongoing environments where non-First Nations people and English language dominate decision-making.

Children's Ground's First Nations leaders have referenced the history of colonisation as impacting 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.

Despite this history, a strength of Darwin First Nations communities is the resilience of people and culture. People are expressing and enacting cultural practices and systems in ways that they can with the knowledge they have as colonisation and western systems and structures continue to disrupt first language and cultural systems, and teaching and learning approaches.

Through Children's Ground 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 history and ongoing current day impact of colonisation and dominant western systems is the foundation from which the CG Approach is seeking to re-establish and re-strengthen individual and collective authority, roles and relationships within First Nations systems, which in turn are a key driver for empowerment and change.

To build on a community's strengths and build a strong foundation for long-term community level change, the CG Approach embeds formal and informal processes and structures that are 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.

The Darwin communities' self-reported strengths, worries and aspirations have been presented earlier on in Section 3. They are re-presented here to demonstrate the long-term vision and determination of Darwin communities to change the future for their children and grandchildren.



Summary of community aspirations, values and priorities

This is a summary of community aspirations, values and some priorities collated from each community's Community Plan and presented as a collective under key themes.

We want happy and safe communities for our families and for our children and families to feel safe in our homes.

We want our communities to be places where there is no trouble and people have fun without alcohol.

We want to have good-looking communities that are attractive for people to live in now and in future generations.

We are the experts in our community, we have our own solutions and can create our own growth and change.

We want our communities to make the decisions for our children and families. We always need to listen to the old people and be led by them.

We want our people to be empowered, independent and working together with other people and groups in Darwin and other places.

We need outsiders to respect us and listen to us. We want honesty and trust between the families and services.

Many of us have worked so hard to make sure our communities are a place that is good for children and families. It makes us tired when people who don't live here are making the decisions.

We want our children to grow strong into learning about their culture. Our cultures are under threat. We need to make sure it is not wiped out.

Our children and families need to know their cultures and their languages. We are proud of ourselves and where we come from. Our children and old people need to be together. The old people hold stories and knowledge, and the children are our future.

Our knowledge needs to be transferred to the young people. We need to teach traditional ways. Many of us have tried to do this before here and in other communities. Funding keeps getting taken away. We want this to happen. We want Children's Ground to help make this happen.

We want the children to grow up to be strong in their culture and their language and to see the world and the people too. We want them to be smart and to know that there is racism.

We want our kids to have a good western education for better health and employment in their future.

Our health is important. We need people looking after themselves and each other.

We need employment for our families, like jobs and running businesses and organisations.

It was hard after the intervention and when they took CDEP away because people couldn't work or be involved in activities here in our community.

We want our families caring for each other. It is important to bring the families and children together.

We have family that don't live in our community. They live other places around Darwin. We want them to be able to join in with the things we are doing.

Families need more things to do. There is lots of drinking because there is nothing for anyone to do. Nothing for young people to do. Nothing for people to be proud of. Families need something to make them happy like hunting and fishing and telling stories for kids.

In the past, families used to come together lots. Funerals were done the proper way. We had regular celebration events, where children and adults had a great time. Outside services worked with us to make this happen. We have ideas for this to happen again.

Summary

The three long-term, community-level outcomes are interconnected, in that short- and medium-term community empowerment, and cultural, social and economic strength will be significant enablers for people achieving safe and inclusive communities over time.

The Contribution Case summary demonstrates progress has been made in the short-term community-level progress measures, particularly in relation to community empowerment processes, achievements and impact, as reported by community members. Evaluation evidence also demonstrates that some progress has been made with engaging young people in activities, including community events, after-hours learning and to a lesser extent health and wellbeing support.

Early changes in community empowerment are supported by the MSC story which showed "community in the driver's seat". This captures a shift from disconnection to empowerment and belonging, as children begin to see their community as a place of pride and safety, and as families grow in confidence and leadership. It demonstrates the strength of community empowerment, governance and leadership, and how this has grown over time.

There was not a uniform pattern of impacts across the three communities leading the CG Approach. At a community level, variation in reported outcomes is not interpreted as evidence of greater or lesser effectiveness across communities. Rather, variations have reportedly resulted from the different starting points and community contexts and importantly, not expecting a standardised set of outcomes across all areas.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the place-based and community-led nature of the CG Approach has enabled community governance and delivery to go at the pace of each area.

This early progress is positive and demonstrates the beginning of strong foundations for community empowerment and leadership. However, holding, growing and sustaining this over 25 years is both critical and challenging. Communities have identified that increased child and family engagement remains an area for strengthening and this has been identified by as a priority by each community across all areas of the CG Approach, including supporting engagement of more family members and young people as next generation leaders in employment and governance.

While evaluation evidence demonstrates increasing engagement in first language and cultural learning for children, young people and adults, progress in this area remains in its infancy and will be a long-term journey, with each community moving at their own pace. The respect for First Nations cultural systems and protocols and the opportunity to strengthen and re-vitalise these has been a significant driver for engagement and empowerment.



The Contribution Case summary and evaluation evidence presented through this report demonstrates that community empowerment and leadership have been significantly enabled by community-based employment. The employment outcomes achieved, coupled with staff reports about the impact of employment, evidences the significant progress made with family level employment. Throughout early-stage delivery of a growth model CG Approach, resources were not available to achieve more widespread community employment, so this remains a high priority for all communities. As previously noted, this will be an enabler for increased community engagement, governance, leadership and has been shown to also influence engagement in learning, health and culture for children, young people and adults.

Contribution Case evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has effectively engaged children, young people and families in safe and positive intergenerational environments, increasing the extent to which families are engaged in their community and walking alongside their children. The evaluation evidence also shows that places and feelings of safety and trust between families and Children's Ground staff, have contributed to people reportedly feel more comfortable and confident to engage more deeply with the CG Approach.

While the prevalence of stress and trauma within communities remains persistent, these are early foundations for building on social and cultural capital within communities, which can be strengthened over time as resources and delivery increases.

Overall, evaluation evidence has shown how Children's Ground's relational, respectful and culturally centred approach builds trust, pride, identity and ownership – with First Nations people beginning to reclaim their voice and rights.

Systems analysis

Over the first five years of WTA CEP (2020 to 2021) and early-stage delivery of the CG Approach (2022 to 2024) in Darwin communities, this evaluation report has demonstrated that early progress has been achieved towards long-term outcomes for children and families.

This section responds to the two systems-level evaluation questions:

- What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and progress towards short-, medium- and long-term impacts (Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, Evaluation)?
- What contribution was made towards broader systems reform?

In this section, a causal pathways analysis approach has been applied to examine the mechanisms of change, identifying the how the five systems reform areas of the CG Approach model have enabled and contributed to the early-stage progress reported in the impact evaluation sections (against the long-term outcomes for children and families).

Following this, evaluation findings are assessed and analysed against the extent to which Children's Ground's ToC held true in practice, based on the Darwin communities' experiences, inputs and resources.

Collectively these findings culminate in a final analysis of any contribution the CG Approach has made towards broader systems reform.

What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and progress towards short-, medium- and long-term impacts?

Children's Ground's five systems reform areas can be understood as the foundational mechanisms through which the conditions for child, family and community wellbeing are created.

The five systems reform areas of the CG Approach are:

- Governance (community-based, bottom-up and locally-led)
- Workforce (local First Nations workforce)
- Integrated services (holistic, preventative and culturally centred)
- Collective investment (outcomes-based funding, over the long-term)
- Evidence (First Nations-led research and evaluation)

These reform areas create the authorising environments for the CG Approach to be delivered in line with the ten principles, which enables the integrated service platform to be delivered in the way intended – through a culturally based, safe and holistic system of services and supports, designed by each community for their community.

Rather than acting as standalone initiatives, the reform areas operate as interconnected enabling systems that reinforce one another to achieve long-term generational change.

Using evaluation data presented throughout this report, the causal pathway analysis articulates how Children's Ground's systems reform creates the conditions for change and impact in the short-, medium- and long-term.

Governance

"Well, Children's Ground is in community. Children's Ground is on ground with community. That's it. Children's Ground is sitting with us. Yeah. Children's Ground works with people, listens to people, and hears the people. They don't come in and telling us what to do. Yeah. I think that's the only reason why CG does it better than anyone else, because they don't come in pointing fingers and telling us what's this and what's that. Long enough we've had balanda [non-First Nations] mob telling us what to do and how to live our lives. And so that's why CG is winning..."

35-40 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Community-led governance structures ensured that services reflected community priorities and cultural authority, and contributed to building trust and increasing engagement in the CG Approach. It established the conditions for self-determination.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that before Children's Ground, there were limited or no consistent community governance structures guiding and informing service delivery across the three Darwin communities.

By establishing First Nations-led governance structures at both community and regional levels, Children's Ground shifted decision-making authority to local people.

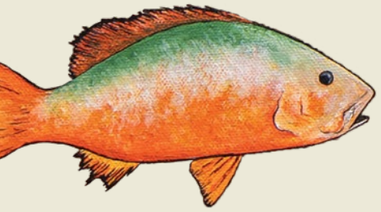
Evaluation findings demonstrate that governance participation increased people's confidence to voice their opinions, to make decisions, to influence service design and delivery and to evaluate the CG Approach.

Families reported feeling proud, valued, respected and responsible because their voices shaped the CG Approach in their community. Local service providers similarly observed that programs were driven by community priorities rather than organisational agendas, creating stronger community buy-in and engagement.

Whilst still in the early stages with more extensive engagement required, community-led governance has created conditions where actively engaged families have moved from being passive recipients of services to active decision-makers. This has contributed to increased community leadership and self-determination.

The evaluation demonstrates that community governance is the foundational enabling condition underpinning all other areas of systems reform.





Employment

"Yeah, I like really working with Children's Ground. Because I'm feeling more confident and I'm confident in talking to other people. Because before, I used to be shy, but now, because working with everyone in Children's Ground, like making me feel comfortable."

50-55 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Community employment emerges as one of the strongest causal drivers of empowerment and engagement. Evaluation evidence repeatedly confirms First Nations community employment as a key element underpinning engagement across all areas of the CG Approach.

Many community staff described employment as transforming their confidence, increasing stability within their families and strengthening their capacity to support children.

Local service providers recognised Children's Ground's community governance and employment as distinguishing the CG Approach from other initiatives and organisations, because community members are shaping and delivering services themselves.

This has been enabled by Children's Ground's intentional, flexible, 'no barriers' community-based employment model, that has created the enabling conditions for people to enter and engage in employment in ways that respond to their individual and family circumstances.

Embedded in organisational policies and systems are dedicated community and culturally based roles, weekly payroll, microfinancing, flexible contracts and culturally responsive leave policies.

Coupled with employment support (pre and during employment) such as daily transport and employment literacy, these conditions and systems reduce barriers that have historically excluded First Nations people from employment. This is evidenced by one-third of community staff entering paid employment for the first time through Children's Ground.

In the highly colonised Darwin environment, it was anticipated that people may have had more and diverse employment opportunities and experiences and the number of people working at Children's Ground as their first experience of paid employment would be lower compared to in more remote areas. However, this has not been the case, with the proportion of people experiencing paid employment for the first time being consistent with community employment in Children's Ground's Central Australian delivery region. In Darwin, the dedicated resources for engaging young people in employment has contributed to this.

Rather than viewing employment solely as an economic outcome, Children's Ground has evidenced employment as fundamental to changes for children and families, demonstrating clear ripple effects from community employment, including active engagement in community governance and leadership and children seeing parents, siblings and grandparents employed, creating visible role models and different future aspirations.

Due to systemic 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.



Services

"It's not just about the programs. It's about how we respond. Like when someone needs...[something], we drop everything and make it happen. That responsiveness, that trust, that care. It's what makes Children's Ground different."

Excerpt of Most Significant Story of change 40-45 years, female, non-First Nations delivery staff member, 2024

Integrated service delivery is the most visible of the system reform areas. It is what people see on the ground every day. Rather than providing fragmented services, Children's Ground integrates services aiming to achieve holistic delivery that focuses on the whole person, whole family and whole community.

The evaluation evidence demonstrates that actively engaged children and families have accessed multiple supports simultaneously, and that this had reduced access barriers.

Increased resources are required to integrate the full suite of services and supports, however, the increasing consistency in delivery over the evaluation period, particularly in-community delivery, began to normalise engagement in early learning and health promotion. Both Children's Ground and local service staff reported increased opportunities and conditions for earlier intervention with actively engaged children and families.

The evaluation demonstrates that Children's Ground has contributed to enhancing the engagement and delivery capacity of some other organisations by coordinating access, supporting transport, facilitating communication and supporting families to navigate complex service systems. Rather than duplicating services, Children's Ground acts as a connector that can strengthen the wider service ecosystem.

Evaluation evidence also showed that integrated delivery provided the conditions that encouraged and enabled families to engage in multiple service areas across the CG Approach. For example, families who initially engage with the CG Approach through early learning often become connected to health promotion, governance, employment and cultural activities.

Investment

"We need more funding... and more money to tell our story or more money to run our programs. More money to keep Children's Ground around."

Excerpt from First Nations evaluation data analysis

Children's Ground's collective investment seeks to provide the enabling conditions for coordinated long-term investment across government, philanthropy and partners to fund long-term outcomes, rather than short-term outputs alone.

Reform in this area has been achieved to a degree, but not to the extent needed or intended to achieve long term sustainable impact.

The WTA phase highlighted the barriers to government and philanthropic funding for communities and organisations that are emerging with a new approach. Both government and philanthropy often look to support programs that are recognised and performing. During the WTA period, Children's Ground was limited to philanthropic funding from partners who had an appetite for innovation and could hold risk, as the CG Approach was being established in unknown contexts and with limited funding.

To ensure that communities were not exposed to external pressures and expectations, there was limited public exposure during the WTA phase. This environment resulted in limited funding avenues which contributed to slow and modest investment and growth over the period.

While the WTA phase in Darwin began with only philanthropic funding, towards the end of 2021 and into 2022, as the communities were transitioning into early-stage delivery, the Australian Government began contributing funding, followed by the Northern Territory Government. All government funding has been secured through application processes. Relying on short-term government program funding makes it difficult to build and sustain the long-term resources needed for high-quality, culturally safe and locally responsive services.

In contrast, Children's Ground's long-term collective philanthropic model, in partnership with programmatic government funding, has provided short-term conditions and environments for community-designed and governed services and delivery, flexible community employment (albeit limited) and responsiveness to each community's context and priorities. It has also enabled continuity of the community workforce, which in turn has enabled continuity of relationships between families and Children's Ground.

On occasion, short-term, siloed funding has disrupted delivery, making it challenging to recruit and retain staff, limiting the growth of local First Nations leadership through employment and governance. When grants ended without replacement funding, Children's Ground lost experienced staff and on occasion this has led to reductions or pauses in some elements of delivery. This has created uncertainty for communities and risked repeating the same instability often experienced by many First Nations communities.

While Children's Ground has not yet achieved the funding required to deliver the full CG Approach in Darwin communities, the evaluation evidenced that short-term outcomes have been achieved despite operating through a constrained growth model with limited resources.

This strengthens the causal pathway because it demonstrates that where adequate investment exists, the enabling conditions operate effectively, with resource limitations constraining scale rather than effectiveness.

Compared with Alice Springs and other remote centres across the NT, Darwin town camp communities receive minimal funding and in-community service delivery. However, if resourced and supported, Darwin Town Camp communities could be critical places for families connecting, building social capital and cultural strengthening. This evaluation has shown that Town Camp communities can be hubs for First Nations empowerment in governance, leadership and employment.

Further efforts are required to secure the long-term investment required to provide the conditions for Children's Ground to continue growing and sustaining delivery over the intended 25-year period, which is critical to building community confidence and sustained engagement – particularly for communities who have lived with a history of short-term programmatic funding.

Evidence

"It makes me feel good about myself, that I'm putting my voice out there, and telling them my story... Yeah. Just makes me feel good."

45-50 years, female, First Nations staff/ family member, 2024

Participatory community-led evaluation functions as a driver for accountability and empowerment, a continuous improvement strategy and as a contribution to national and international evidence bases for leading practice in evaluation of First Nations initiatives.

Through community leadership in longitudinal evaluation, evidence has been generated in ways that respect First Nations knowledge systems and world views, while demonstrating measurable short-term outcomes.

Rather than evaluation occurring externally to communities, local people participate in determining what success looks like, interpreting evidence and shaping future implementation.

This process strengthens accountability to communities while simultaneously generating evidence capable of influencing broader policy and service reform.

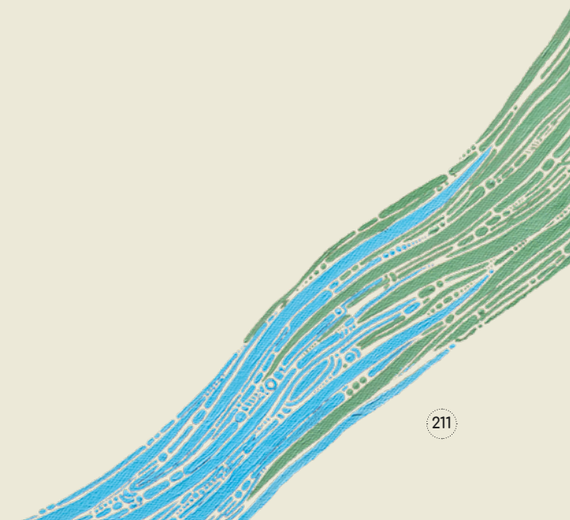
This report itself demonstrates community leadership in evaluation through the cultural evaluation framework, participatory data analysis and community interpretation of findings.

Summary of progress

The evaluation evidence demonstrates that these five systems reform areas do not produce change independently. Rather, they collectively operate as mutually reinforcing causal pathways, providing the enabling conditions for long-term transformational change alongside the practice principles.

They create culturally safe environments where children, families and communities progressively move from exclusion to participation, from service recipients to leaders, and from fragmented western-designed services to culturally based, integrated systems of care.

The evaluation evidence supports that collectively Children's Ground's five systems reform areas have contributed to early change and impact. Rather than acting as standalone, these reform areas operate an interconnected enabling system that reinforce one another and establish the foundations for intergenerational impact.





Evaluation of Theory of Change in practice

Central to a contribution analysis is evaluating an initiative against the ToC.[116]

Children's Ground's ToC provides the long-term vision and anticipated pathways from implementation of the full CG Approach (as shown in Appendix 2, Figure 23).

It is clear throughout this evaluation report that implementing a small-scale growth model rather than the full CG Approach has reduced the capacity for the theory to be implemented as intended in practice.

Figure 17 outlines the ToC inputs, outputs and short-term outcomes specific to the Darwin communities. Following this, there is an analysis of the extent to which Children's Ground's ToC for Darwin communities held true in practice, based on the communities' experiences, inputs and resources. The analysis draws on process and impact data as well as evidence presented throughout the report.

116. Mayne, J. (2008). *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect* (ILAC Brief 16).

Figure 17: Darwin Theory of Change in practice

Assumptions:

The full CG Approach is delivered with integrity, with consistent and continuous engagement of children and their families.

Progressing, however only delivering a small-scale growth model at approx. 25% of full CG Approach.

Over 25 years, a critical mass (at least 75%) of children and young people (aged 0–24 years) have actively engaged and become young families and adults within the community.

Not on-track and too early to evaluate

Inputs & Activities

Children's Ground's WTA CEP
Undertaken in three communities, limited by COVID-19 and funding resources for full WTA.

The CG Approach
Small-scale growth model (approx. 25% of full model) delivered in 3 communities.

- Principles – five of ten delivered as intended (within growth model); three progressing with improvement needed; one not on track; one too early to evaluate.
- Integrated delivery platform: Internally, limited delivery in all five service areas occurred and partnerships with local services began
- Systems reform areas: Provided the enabling conditions for change – as evaluated in this section

Resources
- CG First Nations community-based staff
- CG western-trained staff
- Operations equipment & materials (i.e. vehicles, resources, nutritious food, infrastructure, etc.)

Non-Children's Ground inputs
- Service delivery by other organisations
- Home and community environments

Outputs

WTA CEP
- Initial relationships and trust developed between Children's Ground staff and some people from each community.
- These strengthened over time, with relationships also developing with new families, largely through community staff and leaders employed with CG during the WTA and into early-stage delivery.
- At least one person from each community employed to deliver the WTA within their community, also supporting WTA in the other communities.
- Community members reported feeling respected due to employment and the opportunity to lead the WTA and CG Approach design.
- All three communities decided to begin delivering the CG Approach as a small-scale growth model.

The CG Approach
Darwin CG Approach delivery and activities outlined in Section 1. Through the CG Approach, children, young people, families and whole communities have access to:

- Cultural and western learning (early years and after-hours), including Learning on Country, in-community, in English with some Aboriginal language learning.
- Health promotion integrated into all learning sessions, with additional resources required for more extensive delivery.
- Limited delivery of an integrated system of holistic culturally, relationally and strengths-based services and supports, tailored to individual, family and community needs and priorities.
- Some coordinated service delivery across local service systems, with strengthening required.
- Limited employment opportunities.
- Some cultural teaching, learning and transmission.
- Community leadership opportunities in CG Approach governance, planning and decision-making, with additional resources for community engagement required to expand and strengthen.
- Some positive, safe and fun activities and environments in their community.
- Limited opportunities to build on and strengthen their community.

Short-term outcomes

Children
- Increased access to and engagement in:
  - Cultural and western early years learning and school age learning
  - After-hours activities
  - Health promotion and support, including social/emotional wellbeing
- Increased family engagement in learning and wellbeing.

Families
- Increased access to and engagement in:
  - Employment
  - Economic opportunities
  - Health and SEWB
  - Children's learning and wellbeing
  - Social and family strengthening opportunities and supports
- Increased feelings of empowerment.

Communities
- Two communities have access to intergenerational community centres, yet not entirely fit for purpose
- Some families within communities have increased access to and engagement in:
  - Inclusive First Nations community governance
  - Employment and economic opportunities
  - Community and cultural strengthening opportunities and supports
- Short-term outcomes for children and families demonstrate progress made in building the foundations for long-term community-level change and impact. However, the small-scale growth model for early-stage delivery means it is too early to evaluate community-level outcomes.



Evaluation evidence demonstrates that, in practice, the Darwin scale ToC held true.

From the full CG Approach ToC, most outputs and short-term outcomes were experienced in all three communities to varying degrees. However, as evidenced throughout this report, these have not yet been experienced by a majority of children, young people and families in each community.

From here this section demonstrates identifies key elements that have contributed to causal links between how the CG Approach was delivered and the outputs and short-term outcomes outlined in the 'Darwin ToC in practice'.

Walk, Talk & Act empowered communities

Children's Ground's initial and ongoing WTA CEP phase and community employment were central to building relationships, trust and empowerment, which led to establishing and growing community leadership and governance of the CG Approach for the Darwin region. Over time, community employment, regional governance and activity delivery led to increased family engagement which enabled community-level governance to grow and extend beyond the initial one to two community leaders involved with regional governance.

The WTA process goes beyond community consultation. In all Children's Ground regions, it empowers communities to define their aspirations, worries, priorities and solutions for their children, young people and families.

This has been evidenced as occurring in Darwin communities throughout this report with increased engagement in regional and community governance throughout both the WTA and early-stage delivery phases.

The WTA is always ongoing as part of the CG Approach to continue engaging new families. In Children's Ground's Central Australian and West Arnhem regions, the initial WTA largely transitioned into a 'family engaging family' approach, with WTA occurring informally and as needed. In Darwin communities, COVID-19, cultural diversity and population mobility in some areas resulted in the need for staff to continually build and maintain relationships with existing, new and visiting families. This influenced delivery reach and approaches to developing relationships and building and sustaining engagement over time.

The 'family engaging family' approach has started across Darwin communities, contributing to increased family participation and strengthening relationships with Children's Ground staff. However, the more formal, intensive and targeted WTA continued to be a high priority by the end of this evaluation period.

This has been an important organisational learning about implementation of the CG Approach in this highly colonised and more urban environment, and has demonstrated the importance of flexible and empowering engagement approaches that can respond to changing population patterns.

As outlined in 'Darwin ToC in practice', taking time to build relationships, trust and respect with each community provided opportunities for actively engaged community members to feel valued and empowered.

Rather than having services imposed on them, the WTA enabled communities choose to establish and lead the CG Approach. Reportedly, this made an important contribution to community ownership of the CG Approach from the outset. Then regional and community-level First Nations governance ensured that the design of the CG Approach was based on the needs and priorities of each community and is culturally safe. Western evidence shows that this is in stark contrast to how many other services and programs are designed and delivered.[117] [118]

Access and delivery in-community enabled engagement

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the most impactful drivers of engagement across areas of the CG Approach were:

- Community employment
- Family engaging family
- A consistent presence in community
- Flexible, responsive and supported access (i.e. transport, service coordination)
- Opportunities for positive engagement as soft-entry points into other services and support

Community employment was a significant enabler of community engagement. Evaluation evidence found that the most actively and consistently engaged families in each community were those from which a person was employed with Children's Ground. This demonstrates the ripple effect community employment can have on active engagement in learning, health, governance, etc.

Employing people from as many families and households as possible within communities is a core strategy of the CG Approach. The limited resources for community employment in Darwin meant that employment was only possible within a small number of households.

Despite this, community employment did contribute to community engagement, with family members who are employed with Children's Ground engaging other families within the community. This has consistently been evidenced as an effective engagement approach in all regions delivering the CG Approach. Children's Ground's western-trained staff also contribute to community engagement, however families encouraging other families to participate in Children's Ground remains the most powerful.

117. Coalition of Peaks & Australian Governments. (2020). *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.
118. Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study report* (Vol. 1). Australian Government.

Community employment also enabled Children's Ground to maintain a consistent presence in communities. As noted previously, in-community delivery occurred throughout both the WTA phase and into early-stage delivery, however not to the full extent intended because the infrastructure was not in place for Children's Ground's western-trained staff to undertake all their work in communities.

Over the years it took to access, refurbish and re-open the existing community centres (in two communities), community employment and regular in-community delivery of learning, health and community governance were critical to maintaining a consistent presence in communities. These built trust and confidence in Children's Ground, with families always having someone in the community they could talk to about CG Approach delivery and to seek support – either during delivery or with community staff.

Furthermore, like most organisations, Children's Ground experienced staff retention and recruitment challenges. During these times the continuity of community staff and leaders were important for relationship continuity with children and families in their respective communities.

Importantly, delivery in communities occurred consistently, whether there were two or 20 children and family members engaging on any given day.

Over time this demonstrated the reliability of Children's Ground. This is supported by the Most Significant Change story in which a parent described it taking months to build her confidence to walk over and engage with a learning session.

This enabled the family (featured in the story) to begin engaging at their pace, when they were ready. This experience is consistent with the experiences reported by many community members.

Regular in-community delivery and community-based staff were both reportedly significant enablers of engagement, with some families reporting that they only approach Children's Ground for support when staff are in their community.

Evaluation evidence found that initial engagement led to active and broader engagement across other areas of the CG Approach. That, as feelings of safety and trust developed between families and Children's Ground staff, people reportedly felt more comfortable and confident to engage more deeply with the CG Approach.

The integrated service platform provided opportunities to engage with the CG Approach for positive reasons such as learning, cultural activities (mostly Learning on Country trips, events and employment) which acted as 'soft-entry' pathways to engaging with other service areas including health promotion and support, SEWB, employment and governance.

This is supported by evidence from families reporting beginning their engagement with the CG Approach in early learning sessions, bush trips or community events and going on to engage in health, employment and community leadership through Children's Ground.

This strengths-based approach means families are not defined by their problem or issue. For people who may have minimal engagement and historical low trust in services, it takes time to build trust, confidence and active engagement.

As previously reported, despite Darwin being a well-serviced capital city, families in each Darwin community reported challenges with access to services and programs, which are based outside of their community.

Children's Ground's deliberate model of flexible, responsive and supported access was reportedly a significant enabler for access to and engagement in services within the CG Approach and across the local service system. Providing transport was one of the most significant contributions to enabling and supporting access to services and employment.

Providing transport daily to and from work for people with access to personal vehicles enabled people to maintain their engagement in employment.

Transport for Learning on Country bush trips enabled children and families to engage in cultural teaching and learning, and for some people to visit their homelands/Country, which was previously not a regular opportunity.

Providing transport to local health services enabled families to attend appointments without relying on local bus services, etc, particularly during very wet and humid months. Coupled with the role Children's Ground undertook in coordinating service appointments and some in-community delivery by local health clinics, these collectively contributed to increased access to and engagement in clinical health for children and families.

Coordinating the delivery of after-hours programs by local providers in communities also contributed to increased access to learning opportunities for children and young people. As reported by services, young people's engagement in after-hours activities was enabled by the community relationships held by Children's Ground staff, including both community-based and western-trained staff.



Flexible and responsive delivery and action contributed to building family's trust and confidence in reliability of Children's Ground.

This has been evidenced as important for people who have experienced the challenges of navigating service systems that, in delivery, can often be complex, siloed and feel culturally unsafe, which in turn can compound stress, crisis, vulnerability and inequity.

Engagement led to short-term outcomes for actively engaged children and families

The evaluation evidence demonstrates that the inputs and activities/outputs of Children's Ground's ToC for Darwin has led to the short-term outcomes anticipated.

The in-community access to early learning led to engagement, which provided opportunities for children to build consistency in cultural and western early learning. For actively engaged children, this included regularly participating in health promotion from their earliest years – contributing to the reported increases in health behaviours demonstrated by children over time. This is evidenced by the engagement data and Most Significant Change stories and staff and family interviews.

Through each community's plan and governance, their identified priorities were actioned.

Opportunities for young people to participate in after-hours programs in their community were delivered. This increased engagement of young people in community activities, particularly during times that can be common risk periods.

Concerns about some young people being disengaged from mainstream primary school education saw strategies and resources put in place to support school enrolment, to provide transport to school and to complement or extend their education to include an after-hours homework club.

These examples of flexible and responsive delivery demonstrate causal link between the delivery and outcomes of the CG Approach.

Increases in families engaging in their own health through Children's Ground has been evidenced by engagement data, as well as family reports. For actively engaged people, this reportedly resulted in whole families increasing engagement in health services and beginning to build confidence and agency over their health.

Further, engagement with Children's Ground also led to increased engagement in local clinical health services, with access supported by Children's Ground. This led to children increasing their engagement in critical preventative health checks, immunisations and assessments.

Increased service access and engagement in health services have been evidenced as increasing confidence in health and help-seeking behaviours for children and adults.

One of the most powerful outcomes from the first five years of the CG Approach in Darwin has been establishing and growing a community-based First Nations workforce.

There was an appetite for employment within communities where local employment opportunities did not previously exist and for people facing a range of employment barriers. Resources and capacity for employment were limited due to funding.

Demonstrated employment outcomes have been enabled by Children's Ground's holistic and flexible no-barriers model. Staff reported that the wrap-around support contributed to their frequency and consistency in employment engagement – as did dedicated cultural and community-based roles that enabled people to work based on their strengths, talents and knowledge. The positive impact of this model is evidenced by the steady increase in community-based staff employed over the evaluation period.

Centring, privileging and empowering culture within all areas of delivery has contributed to opportunities for community leaders and families to revitalise, reimagine and learn traditional knowledge and practices. As some staff/family members reported, as adults they are now starting to learn their Aboriginal language and cultural knowledge, at the same time as children.





As previously reported, this has been a slow but deliberate and empowering journey in Darwin communities – in spite of the challenges commonly associated with cultural teaching, learning and transmission in this more urban environment.

While there has not been dedicated funding and resources for cultural learning and development, the journey has started in all three Darwin communities.

Feelings of safety and empowerment, along with community governance and employment, has changed the relationship that families have with services – some people have moved from being service recipients to service designers, governors, deliverers and evaluators. The evaluation evidence shows how supporting people to lead services started with developing relationships and establishing and engaging people in environments of safety and empowerment, and providing equitable and responsive access support.

The evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground's contribution to the short-term outcomes has been enabled by deliberate processes and conditions that seek to establish places and environments of safety (cultural, emotional, physical), inclusion and empowerment, as outlined in the ToC and descriptions of the CG Approach.

Summary

Findings from this evaluation show that the key foundations and pathways articulated in the ToC are being effectively established and having a positive impact for actively engaged children and families.

It is evident is that there are a range of influences that together contribute to achieving short-term impact.

Communities are working towards the same long-term outcomes from different starting points and through different implementation pathways, with community context influencing not only implementation, but also the enabling conditions required for sustained long-term change.

While medium- and long-term generational outcomes will only emerge over time, the evaluation confirms that the critical building blocks for sustained, intergenerational change are in place and operating as intended. This causal pathway analysis shows the overlapping interconnectedness of outcomes of children and families, which will then build over time to achieve community outcomes and population level change. It also shows the importance of the Children's Ground's ten practice principles that define how the CG Approach is implemented.

What contribution was made towards broader systems reform?

This evaluation of the CG Approach in Darwin contributes to a building evidence base. Over almost 15 years, the CG Approach has been designed, governed, delivered and evaluated by eight communities across three diverse regions. This includes town camp communities in a remote regional centre (Central Australia) and more urban regional centres (Darwin), a very remote community (Kakadu, West Arnhem) and small remote and very remote homeland (north of Alice Springs and Marlkawo, West Arnhem respectively).

This evaluation marks Children's Ground's fourth publicly released evaluation of the CG Approach in a new context, in terms of geography, cultural connection and maintenance and community and population contexts. Furthermore, in 2024 the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing engaged an external evaluation consulting agency to undertake an independent evaluation of the CG Approach across Children's Ground's Central Australian and Top End regions.

This evaluation confirms findings across diverse locations in relation to the contribution that the CG Approach makes change and impact for children and families and the contribution to broader systems reform.

A consistent finding across all evaluations (internal and external) is that, irrespective of the community, cultural, population and geographic context, the model has achieved positive short-term changes in early childhood, health promotion, culture and language, local employment, governance, safety and empowerment.

This is also irrespective of whether the CG Approach was delivered in full or as a smaller-scale growth model. However, internal and external evaluations have found that to build on short-term outcomes and progress towards sustained outcomes over the long-term, implementation of the full CG Approach will be required.

From internal and external evaluation evidence, across all three delivery regions, the CG Approach has consistently:[119] [120] [121] [122]

- Established, strengthened or built on community empowerment, governance and leadership.
- Strengthened culture and language across generations.
- Created environments of safety and inclusion in communities.
- Achieved First Nations community-based employment in areas where unemployment and underemployment were commonplace. There has been high demand for employment in all communities.
- Increased child and family access and engagement in early learning, in communities where there was little to no active previous engagement.
- Increased engagement of young people with their community, including targeted youth activities (where resources were available)
- Increased whole-of-family and community intergenerational events and environments.
- Improved access to health promotion and support, engaging individuals and whole families, including increased access to external health services.
- Increased access to a range of service systems to support integrated care (clinical health, Centrelink, school systems, etc).
- Increased health literacy with people of all ages, which for some children and family members has translated into health behaviour change.
- Increased the extent to which families are engaging in their children's learning, health and wellbeing.

119. Children's Ground. (2021). *Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe – Children's Ground in Central Australia: 2017 to 2019 baseline and early progress.*
120. Children's Ground. (2024). *Evaluation of Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe – Children's Ground in Central Australia: 2020–2022.*
121. Lorains, J., & Vadiveloo, J. (2019). *Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem final evaluation – 2013 to 2017.*
122. Allen & Clarke Consulting. (2025). *Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, final report* (not a public document).

In the early stages of implementation, particularly in the context of smaller-scale growth model delivery of the CG Approach, increased access to and engagement in learning, health, employment and leadership are the key short-term outcomes expected.

This evidence demonstrates when the key principles and enabling systemic conditions underpinning the CG Approach are implemented with integrity, either at full scale or through a growth model, they enable empowerment, increase access and equity, and increase engagement of children and families in services, many of whom have a history of experiencing significant barriers to engagement with mainstream services. The extent to which these findings were evidenced in each region was determined by the funding and resources available.

This Darwin evaluation has now demonstrated the impact of the CG Approach in urban communities where First Nations languages, kinship systems, connection to Country and cultural practices have been significantly disrupted. With the majority of First Nations people across Australia living in similar urbanised environments where non-First Nations cultures dominate, these findings can have broad national implications.

Consistent evaluation findings across diverse delivery contexts are evidence that the CG Approach is both impactful and scalable.

This is supported by the independent evaluation of the CG Approach which stated:

"Children's Ground has developed highly effective community decision-making and community governance structures and processes that empower communities and enable them to exercise effective control of the Children's Ground approach...

Children's Ground consistently creates culturally and physically safe environments where individuals and communities are provided the conditions and resources necessary to use their own strengths, skills, knowledge and relationships to improve their communities...

The alignment of the Children's Ground approach with leading practice for prevention and responsiveness to complex disadvantage through holistic, place-based community and First Nations-led design is a key enabler for the effective implementation of activities." [123]



123. Allen & Clarke Consulting. (2025). *Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, final report* (not a public document).

Over decades, major inquiries, reviews and frameworks at national and jurisdictional levels have presented and re-presented the statistics, human realities and reasons, both historical and current, for the profound inequity experienced by many First Nations people in Australia.[124] [125] [126] [127] [128] [129] [130] [131] [132] [133] [134] [135] [136] [137] [138] [139] [140] [141]

From these, a consistent set of recommendations continues to emerge, recognising that the status quo is failing many First Nations children and families, with the majority recommending First Nations self-determination as central to significant reforms.

However, significant reform that changes the status quo and improves outcomes for First Nations people are yet to occur.

This is demonstrated by the annual Closing the Gap reports which show only minimal improvements in some Closing the Gap targets over almost 20 years and the overarching finding of the Productivity Commission's *'Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap'* was 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".

Coupled with decades of consistent recommendations from many reviews, this evidence shows that there remains an urgent need for reform that changes the status quo. In line with the recommendations from the Productivity Commission, there is a need to rethink systems and services for First Nations people – shifting to services and systems that are designed, led and evaluated by First Nations communities, that can be culturally based and locally responsive.

"They keep talking about Closing the Gap – the gap isn't closing at all"

First Nations Community Leader, excerpt from a Community Plan

In contrast to this, evaluations of the CG Approach have consistently evidenced short-term outcomes for children and families across a range of Closing the Gap targets including learning, health, employment, empowerment and cultural development.

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 First Nations Elders and communities, and western-based evidence for reforming systems and services with First Nations people.

124. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (1997). *Bringing them home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.* Commonwealth of Australia.
125. Productivity Commission. (2024). *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2024.* Australian Government.
126. Productivity Commission. (2025). *Report on Government Services 2025.* Australian Government.
127. Council of Australian Governments. (2008). *National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap).*
128. Coalition of Peaks & Australian Governments. (2020). *National Agreement on Closing the Gap.*
129. Productivity Commission. (2025). *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report 2025.* Australian Government.
130. Australian Government Department of Health. (2021). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031.*
131. Productivity Commission. (2020). *Mental Health Inquiry Report.* Australian Government.
132. Dudgeon, P., Milroy, H., & Walker, R. (Eds.). (2014). *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (2nd ed.). Commonwealth of Australia.
133. SNAICC. (2021). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.*
134. Productivity Commission. (2024). *A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care.*
135. Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. (1991). *National report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Vols. 1–5). Australian Government Publishing Service.
136. Australian National Audit Office. (2021). *Remote Housing in the Northern Territory.*
137. Australian Law Reform Commission. (2017). *Pathways to Justice—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.*
138. Australian Government Department of Health. (2021). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031.*
139. Annual Closing the Gap reports from multiple organisations: https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/annual-reports
140. Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study report* (Vol. 1). Australian Government.
141. Ibid



This is supported by the independent evaluation of the CG Approach which stated:

> "Collectively, the activities delivered by Children's Ground are aimed at creating the conditions necessary for long-term change for individuals, families, and communities. In this respect, Children's Ground fills a service provision niche in all the communities it works with by supporting people to receive the foundational support they require for improved outcomes across all domains."[142]

Both internal and external evaluations have demonstrated how the CG Approach aligns with the Australian Government's key strategies and priorities. As outlined in the external evaluation, the CG Approach directly or indirectly aligns[143]:

- Directly with 10 Closing the Gap outcomes and indirectly with 7 Closing the Gap outcomes[144]
- Directly with 10 Health Plan priorities and indirectly with 2 priorities[145]
- All eight Early Years Strategy outcomes[146]
- All five Early Childhood Strategy goals[147]
- All four National Justice Reinvestment Program principles[148]

This demonstrates the contribution Children's Ground has and could make to broader systems reform nationally.

The findings from the Darwin evaluation are consistent with evaluations of the CG Approach in all regions which collectively provide detailed process (implementation) and impact (outcome) learnings across a range of Australian and Northern Territory government priorities.

Summary

The Darwin evaluation findings are consistent with previous evaluations of the CG Approach across diverse community contexts. There is now evidence of impact from almost 15 years of delivery within eight communities across three delivery regions that differ in context in terms of geography, cultural connection and maintenance and community and population contexts.

Consistent findings have emerged from both internal and external evaluations across all regions showing that the CG Approach has achieved short-term impact, irrespective of the community context. The extent of the impact has been influenced by funding and resources, and it has been noted that long term change will require full and sustainable funding.

Notwithstanding this, the CG Approach consistently demonstrates short-term impact in key drivers for long term change in relation to children and families. The evidence suggests that the CG Approach is both impactful and scalable across diverse locations.

The findings indicate that the CGA can contribute to broader systems reform, and that it offers an opportunity to achieve the key priorities of both community and government.

142. Allen & Clarke Consulting. (2025). *Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, final report* (not a public document).
143. Ibid.
144. National Agreement on Closing the Gap
145. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031
146. Early Years Strategy 2024–2034
147. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy
148. Justice Reinvestment Design principles



Conclusions

First Nations conclusion

This evaluation shows how many families are participating, how many still need to engage, how our kids are growing, how we need to get more parents to bring their kids to the programs so that kids can have a good start, get ready for school. It also shows that we need more resources and more effort is needed to continue supporting our children and families.

This report shows that community voice, community leadership and teamwork between community and Children's Ground have been our main strengths. Employment has also been a big strength. Because a lot of families struggle to go out in the mainstream to get a job, they get knocked back. They find it very hard. They just want to get a job and live their life, but they struggle to do it, which is sad. Children's Ground is a place where they can find a job and improve their lives. No matter what your history, if you can work with kids, work respectfully, you can work here at Children's Ground.

Looking back over the past five years, the biggest highlight has been seeing the outcomes for our children and families. Early years kids learning. Also seeing community come together. Gatherings, after-hours programs, Christmas parties and health days have brought people together and helped make the community stronger. We have also seen young people getting up and working, engaging, having employment. Support to build leadership has been life changing for some of us.

What gives us confidence for the future is seeing more young people involved and seeing them become role models for others in the community. But there is still more work to do. We need to engage more people from across the community, more Walk and Talk, involve more families and more bush trips. Because some families don't do bush trips anymore, like in old days, they just sit at home and drink or gamble. That's not healthy. If they go out bush, that's good for your health, for your spirit and also for the kids to grow up knowing their Country rather than seeing their parents smoking, drinking.

That is the wrong thing for the kids to see and learn from. We need to parent to be good role models for their kids. We would also like to see more resources to do this work, have more and better infrastructure.

Governments and services need to hear what communities want and need and learn how to work with communities. They need to come into the communities, work together with communities, get the communities involved in decision-making and learning how the system works. Services need to come into communities, listen and learn from the people who live there. How the system works now, lack of communication is a big factor. There are a lot of services and stakeholders out there, they should be coming into the community and really listen, like should want to know what we need. It's like they don't care about anything really.

Our responsibility is to create a stable community for future generations. We want children and young people to grow up with strong support, education, culture and opportunities in our communities. We want a community where people do not have to worry about a lack of communication or support, and where future generations can benefit from the foundations being built today. We want our future generations to grow up healthy, learn from your community, and be strong leaders for the future. Children's Ground is supporting that, initiating Closing the Gap. That is what it is all about – listening to the community, writing up what they say, like this report, collecting information from Elders and young people from the community. That is a start for Closing the Gap. The young people are coming up and becoming leaders at Children's Ground and for their communities. We want more such young people becoming strong.

Western conclusion

The early progress findings of the CG Approach in Darwin communities is evidencing modest but significant changes for children and families that are foundational to long term impact.

Children's Ground's is achieving the early stages of community-led system transformation grounded in community empowerment and wellbeing.

Key impacts are evident across learning, health and employment. Children and young people have increased access to early years and after-hours learning, cultural and on-Country learning, building confidence, language, identity and learning outcomes. Health promotion is now embedded through learning, family engagement and employment, supporting children and families to strengthen health literacy, healthy routines, social and emotional wellbeing, and access to clinical services. Community-based employment has been one of the strongest drivers of change, creating culturally safe and flexible jobs in community that build confidence, pride, leadership and economic participation, while also strengthening family engagement in children's learning, health and wellbeing. Together, these early impacts are critical to establishing the foundations for long-term wellbeing, opportunity and self-determined change.

This evaluation has evidenced that it is critical to invest resources and time in processes that create the space for genuine First Nations empowerment and control in decision-making. This provides environments for First Nations language, knowledge systems and practices to be strengthened and enacted, irrespective of the disruption from colonisation to connections to culture and Country.

When the principles and enabling systemic conditions of the CG Approach are implemented with integrity they can achieve short-term outcomes, even within a smaller-scale growth model with limited resources.

This is evidenced by demonstrated early-stage impact in community employment, strong community leadership, child and family engagement in early learning, reported increases in healthy behaviours for children and adults, young people engaging in their community, and reportedly increased agency in individual and family wellbeing and 'help seeking' behaviours.

In a national context of increasingly poor outcomes for many First Nations people in education, health, employment and social and cultural life, Children's Ground's evaluation evidence demonstrates that the CG Approach has been successful in these areas in contrast to national trends.

Medium- and long-term outcomes from the CG Approach will only be realised over the course of the 25-year strategy. However, there is evidence demonstrating that the critical building blocks and foundations of safe, inclusive and empowered communities are being established and building, which are necessary to achieve sustained generational change.

Causal links between the systems, processes and outcomes of the CG Approach in Darwin have been evidenced throughout the report. There is strong evidence that Children's Ground's systems reforms are not simply implementation strategies but the conditions for change themselves.

The findings show that reform in one area of systems, services or practice alone is not enough. As mutually reinforcing causal pathways, this evaluation has demonstrated that the systemic conditions and authorising environments required for change are interconnected and are stimulated by reform in other areas.

Community governance authorised local First Nations decision-making. Community employment enabled empowerment and leadership. Together, community governance and employment created culturally safe, trusted and locally responsive delivery. Integrated service delivery improved access and engagement. Collective investment provides conditions for innovation and community leadership. Community-led evaluation enables continuous learning and development and creates evidence from a local, First Nations perspective.

Together, the system reform elements created the enabling conditions through which the ten principles could be enacted, and the culturally based and holistic, integrated service system could be delivered and responsive to the local context and priorities.

Through this, the CG Approach is reportedly able to address critical service gaps while simultaneously contributing to and enhancing the effectiveness of other providers. While some evidence of this emerged during early-stage delivery in Darwin, this is the ultimate outcome of the CG Approach – creating a cohesive and responsive service and support system for children and families that ensures seamless access, safe engagement and amplified outcomes across the broader service ecosystem.

Implementing the CG Approach in Darwin has been an opportunity for Children's Ground to evaluate and demonstrate the impact of the Approach in a more urban setting, where the impacts of colonisation reflect those experienced in cities and regional centres across Australia. Coupled with the evaluations of the CG Approach in Central Australia and West Arnhem, collectively, the evidence emerging indicates that the CG Approach is scalable and effective in diverse contexts in achieving early-stage impact and establish conditions for long term change. These finding have broad reaching impact for community contexts nationally.

This is evidenced by Children's Ground's progress in outcomes and systems reform demonstrated as lacking in the Closing the Gap priority reforms and targets outlined in the Productivity Commission's 2024 review of the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*.[149]

Importantly, the evaluation shows that the limited resources of the growth model delivered with Darwin communities constrained the scale of implementation rather than the effectiveness of the model itself. Continued long-term investment will therefore strengthen the reach and cumulative impact of the CG Approach.

This is supported by the independent evaluation of the CG Approach which stated that:

> "Partial implementation of the Children's Ground approach is achieving the shorter-term outcomes specified in the program logic. Adequate and comprehensive long-term funding would enable conclusive demonstration of whether or to what extent this is the case." [150]

The primary recommendation of the external evaluation was that:

> "The Australian Government should consider committing to a comprehensive multi-departmental, long-term funding approach for Children's Ground. The funding approach should include an initial period of seven years." [151]

Overall, this evaluation demonstrates that Children's Ground is establishing the foundations required for sustained improvements in child development, family wellbeing, community empowerment, strong social, economic and cultural capital within communities and long-term systems transformation led by local First Nations communities.

149. Productivity Commission. (2024). *Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: Study report* (Vol. 1). Australian Government.
150. Allen & Clarke Consulting. (2025). *Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, final report* (not a public document).
151. Allen & Clarke Consulting. (2025). *Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, final report* (not a public document).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary and acronymous

Definition of key terms

Term	Definitions
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).
Community Plans	Strategic and operational documents developed with each community outlining aspirations, goals and delivery priorities.
Critical mass	At least 75% of the service population in each community.
Garramilla	Larrakia name for Darwin
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.
First Nations Evaluation Framework	A culturally grounded framework developed by community leaders to assess impact
First Nations Governance	Decision-making structures led by local community based First Nations people to guide CG Approach delivery – at a regional and community level.
First Nations, Indigenous, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	Children's Ground works with a range of First Nations people from different language groups. First Nations is used when referring to engagement in the CG 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.
Impact evaluation	Change and impact for children, families and communities is evaluated against the progress measures and long-term outcomes of the CG Approach.
Integrated Service Platform	The five core service and support areas of the CG Approach: Learning & Wellbeing, Health & Wellbeing, Economic Development, Cultural Development and Community Development.
Money story	Income/expenditure and financial circumstances, for individuals, families and/or 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.
Town Camps	Town camps are described as distinct Aboriginal communities established on the edges of towns, emerging historically from "fringe camps" created under discriminatory legislation and welfare regimes that controlled Aboriginal mobility and residence, Aboriginal people were unable to live within the formal boundaries of a town or city (Khalidi 1989; Collmann 1988; Heppell and Wigley 1981). Town camps became more formally recognised and organised as Aboriginal communities from the 1970s onward, as residents began to campaign collectively for land tenure, housing and essential services (Heppell and Wigley 1981; Collmann 1988).
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 the full implementation of the 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.

Acronyms

ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics
Avg: Average
CEP: Community Engagement & Planning
CG: Children's Ground
CG Approach: Children's Ground Approach
EFT: Equivalent Full-Time
FSS: Family Support Services
GDA: Gwalwa Daraniki Association
MSC: Most Significant Change
NT: Northern Territory
PaRBA: Palmerston and Regional Basketball Association
SEWB: Social and Emotional Wellbeing
WTA: Walk, Talk & Act

Appendix 2: About Children's Ground (additional information)

Walk, Talk & Act, Community Engagement & Planning phase

Before beginning delivery of the CG Approach with any community, Children's Ground undertakes a Community Engagement and Planning phase, referred to as the Walk, Talk and Act (see Figure 18).

During this phase Children's Ground employs local community staff to work alongside western-trained Children's Ground staff to lead engagement family-by-family and/or house-by-house. The 'Act' part of WTA includes delivering early learning sessions and community events as opportunities to bring families together and to have open discussions about people's aspirations and worries for their children, family and community and about the CG Approach.

Figure 18: Children's Ground's Walk, Talk & Act Community Engagement & Planning phase

The WTA includes:

Informed decision-making	Led by local people	Family- and community-oriented	Active	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.

Children's Ground's Community Engagement and Planning has four phases. From Children's Ground's experiences in other regions, this phase can take anywhere from 6 to 24 months.

The CEP process involves a rigorous planning, assessment and decision-making process that has key milestones which are monitored over the period prior to any decision to proceed with implementation of the CG Approach, as outlined in Figure 19.

Figure 19: Community Engagement & Planning stages



Note: *Depends on existing relationships between Children's Ground and community

The CEP Report is submitted to Children's Ground's Board as stages progress for monitoring and approval against strategy.

The CEP process culminates in three necessary outputs:

1. Approval and request for delivery of the CG Approach from Traditional Owners, Community Leaders and/or Cultural Elders/Authorities.
2. Completion of a strategic and operational plan with each community – informed by family's aspirations and worries identified throughout the WTA.
3. Approval from Children's Ground's Board to begin delivery, either as a growth or full model, depending on available funding and resources.

Once approved, each community's strategic and operational plan becomes the foundation and direction for the design, governance and delivery of the CG Approach.

The CG Approach – Further information

This additional information provides further details about each element of the CG Approach, including the ten practice principles, the integrated service platform and the five areas of systems reform.

There is a reinforcing overlap and interconnectedness between the ten principles, five integrated service areas and five systemic conditions for change. For example, 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' (principle) relates to the integrated service platform and the integrated services systems reform area. This ensures that key components of the CG Approach are working in all three levels – in practice, service access and systems reform.

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.

How is the CG Approach implemented?

The ten principles (outlined in Figure 20) are practised every day to create the environment for the above enabling conditions of change to be effective. These principles create a safe place for the communities to thrive and the enabling conditions to give way to the long-term meaningful outcomes we are striving for.

Figure 20: Children's Ground's 10 practice principles

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

By working in line with these ten principles, Children's Ground ensures that the CG Approach is not a 'service' that delivers 'to' people. It is services that are designed and led by – and are part of – each community. It is an approach that builds upon and strengthens the social, cultural and economic wealth where children live, recognising local capability, vision, strength and history of resilience.

What services are delivered across the integrated system?

Historically, systems separate and silo services and supports. The CG Approach integrates all elements of wellbeing (learning, health, economic, community and cultural), addressing the structural, cultural, social and economic needs and conditions required for children and families in any community to thrive.[152] [153]

On a day-to-day basis, the integrated service platform is the most visible part of the CG Approach. This is a holistic system of prevention designed to respond to the multiple factors that are needed for children and families to flourish, by placing these services where people live.

Figure 21 provides practical details about what services and supports are delivered through the CG Approach.

Figure 21: CG Approach integrated service platform

25 year Learning, Wellbeing and Development				
	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 cont. • 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			

Integration and Delivery

152. Verbunt, E., Luke, J., Paradies, Y., Bamblett, M., Salamone, C., Jones, A., & Kelaher, M. (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
153. Moore, T. (2024). *Core care conditions for children and families: Implications for policy and practice*. Murdoch Children's Research Institute. https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597.v2

Across this service, system collaboration occurs between each area and team internally, with all staff holding a collective responsibility to integrate services that centre children, their families and community.

Collaboration with local services and organisations is also central to this service system, ensuring that children and families have seamless access to the services and support they need within and external to Children's Ground.

What enables the principles and services to be delivered as intended?

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.

The CG Approach establishes the enabling conditions that First Nations people identify as essential for generational change. These enabling conditions include: Integrated Services, Community Governance, local First Nations Workforce, Collective Investment and Evidence. They provide the foundation for long-term transformation at the community level and drive systemic reform at the national level. How the CG Approach has reformed these key systemic areas for change is shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22: Systems reform – the enabling conditions for change

	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.

At its core, the CG Approach assumes that when these conditions are in place, communities can shift from entrenched intergenerational disadvantage to improved wellbeing and opportunity – culturally, socially, economically and politically.

The combination of Children's Ground's ten practice principles (the 'how'), integrated service platform (the 'what') and reform in governance, workforce, investment and evaluation (systems reform and enabling conditions for change) enable 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 CG Approach Theory of Change

Children's Ground's Purpose

Achieve systemic reform over 25 years through the Children's Ground Approach led by our First Nations people. Evidencing this approach for national reform. And through our approach, celebrate and uplift First Nations knowledge, creating equity and access to high-quality education, health and economy in community for the next generation of children.

To achieve the ToC with local communities and nationally, Children's Ground works at three levels:

Community change: First Nations people in communities have access to and lead high-quality, integrated and culturally responsive services that are inclusive and place-based, and that create safety and wellbeing. Every child enjoys wellbeing with their families. Individuals, families and communities have agency over their lives. Whole communities shift from intergenerational inequity to intergenerational opportunity and wellbeing.

Systems change: A national, integrated service delivery and policy system that meets the long-term needs of children, families and communities and builds on their identity, history, strengths and ambitions. A system that values First Nations knowledge.

Societal change: To celebrate, know and build respect for people, cultures, histories and aspirations as a nation so all people are valued. First Nations history and culture is celebrated as a central part of our nation's identity.

The ToC provides an important foundation for evaluations of the CG Approach because more detailed elements are used to understand the extent to which regional-level outcomes are being achieved through the CG Approach with the integrity intended in the full model – and how these are contributing to local and national progress towards the organisational ToC.

Whilst Children's Ground in Darwin has started with a small-scale CG Approach growth model, early-stage delivery and progress will be contributing to the organizational ToC.

Figure 23: Theory of change for long-term child outcomes

Assumptions:

- The full CG Approach is delivered with integrity, with consistent and continuous engagement of children and their families.
- Over 25 years a critical mass (at least 75%) of children and young people (aged 0–24 years) have actively engaged and become young families and adults within the community.

Inputs

Children's Ground's WTA CEP phase undertaken to establish local governance, relationships, trust, assess capacity in relation to people, funding, resources with decisions by community and CG to progress implementing the CG Approach.

The CG Approach (full model) delivered in all communities with the CG region – including the ten principles; five delivery areas; five enabling systems conditions.

Resources

- CG First Nations community-based staff
- CG western-trained staff
- Community Hub
- Operations equipment & materials (i.e. vehicles, resources, nutritious food, infrastructure, etc.)

Non-Children's Ground inputs

- Service delivery by other organisations.
- Home and community environments
- Government policy environment

Activities/Outputs

WTA CEP

- WTA activities are outlined in Section 3.4.
- Relationships and trust established, that strengthen over time and extend to more community members and families.
- Local community employment to deliver the WTA within their community.
- Communities decide to deliver the CG Approach.

The CG Approach
Full CG Approach activities outlined in Section 1.1. Through the CG Approach, children, young people, families and whole communities have access to:

- Cultural and western learning (early years and after-hours), including Learning on Country, in-community, in Aboriginal language and English.
- Health promotion integrated into all learning sessions.
- Individual child learning and health plans.
- An integrated system of holistic culturally, relationally and strengths-based services and supports, tailored to individual, family and community needs and priorities.
- Coordinated service delivery across local service systems
- Employment and other economic development opportunities
- Cultural teaching, learning, transmission and life.
- Community leadership opportunities in CG Approach governance, planning and decision-making.
- Positive, safe and fun activities and environments in their community.
- Opportunities to build on and strengthen their community.

Short-term Outcomes (Years 1 to 3 of delivery)

Children
Increased access to and engagement in:

- Cultural and western early years learning and school age learning.
- After-hours activities.
- Health promotion and support, including social/emotional wellbeing.

Increased family engagement in learning and wellbeing.

Families
Increased access to and engagement in:

- Employment
- Economic opportunities
- Health and SEWB
- Children's learning and wellbeing
- Social and family strengthening opportunities and supports

Increased feelings of empowerment.

Communities

- Access to intergenerational community centres
- Increased First Nations community governance
- Increased feelings of safety and inclusion
- Increased access to and engagement in:
  - Employment and economic opportunities
  - Community and cultural strengthening opportunities and supports

Medium-term Outcomes (Years 4-20 of delivery)

- Improving western education outcomes
- Improving first language and cultural knowledge
- Improving health and wellbeing literacy, behaviours and outcomes
- Improved SEWB literacy behaviours and outcomes
- Improving family economic opportunities and strength
- Improving family health and wellbeing literacy, behaviours and outcomes
- Improving individual and family SEWB literacy, behaviours and outcomes
- Improving cultural and social wellbeing
- Strengthening community empowerment, governance and
- Increasing child and family service engagement
- Improving community level health and wellbeing
- Improving social inclusion and wellbeing
- Strengthening cultural life and wellbeing
- Improving economic literacy and strength

Long-term Outcomes (Years 20+ of delivery)

- Children have 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 and 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

Appendix 3: Western evaluation framework outcomes and progress indicators

	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 quyality 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 **YEAR 1-3**	A critical mass (75%) of children engaged in early years learning No. of children (3-5 years) engaging in early years learning (progressing towards Universal Access)		No. of children engaged in health promotion	No. of children engaged in SEWB	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 **YEAR 4-6**	% 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
	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

Appendix 4: Data definitions, challenges and limitations

The following outlines data definitions, challenges and limitations of this evaluation.

Baseline data collection

The evaluation did not include a consistent baseline measure of outcomes across all communities.

This reflected Children's Ground's commitment to relational approaches and non-extractive engagement practices. The ability to establish and maintain baseline information was also influenced by limited resourcing and community circumstances. These factors limited opportunities to collect consistent baseline information across all communities and to compare change over time.

Therefore, baseline data collection and planning activities were introduced progressively as trust, relationships and participation developed within communities, rather than preceding community engagement.

Data by age groups

Children's Ground's standard age groups are as follows:

- 0–8 years, representing early years more broadly across health and other areas
- 9–17 years, representing young people and family members
- 18+ years, representing adults and family members

Data is also presented by age groups that represent specific age and stage engagement. Throughout the report, this includes the following age groups:

- 0–5 years, for early years learning data
- 0–3 years for key maternal and child health data
- 6–17 years, for engagement of young people in after-hours learning engagement
- 0–17 years, representing engagement of all children and young people

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.

Data differences

Population and individual demographic data is regularly being reviewed and cleaned, including dates of birth, name corrections, etc. As a result, some annual data presented throughout this report may slightly differ to data previously presented in Children's Ground's Annual Reports, Impact Reports, funding reports, etc.

Baseline data

The majority of baseline, before Children's Ground, data was collected throughout the WTA CEP and/or during early-stage delivery. Some baseline data is limited due to insufficient resources to collect more extensive baseline data.

Efforts were made to retrospectively collect some missing baseline data, however, this was challenging due to population mobility, staff turnover in key delivery and management positions and the ongoing need to continue building relationships with families in each community.

Evaluation data collection samples

First Nations staff and family members

The participant sample deliberately included community members with varying levels of involvement however, it did not capture the perspectives of people who do not engage with the CG Approach. Those not currently engaging with Children's Ground were not proactively approached by the evaluation team. Posters were displayed in communities to invite participation from anyone living in the communities; however, this did not result in any engagement. For one community, only one First Nations staff/family member was able to be interviewed. This was due to the community experiencing a period of very low engagement. Findings should be read with this in mind.

Local service/program stakeholders

The diverse type and nature of collaborations between Children's Ground and local services (e.g. education, health, arts, language, enterprise projects), meant that some did not know enough about Children's Ground's daily delivery to respond to every interview question, so they responded, 'Don't know'. None of the local serves interviewed were aware of the scope of the CG Approach and the system change agenda.



External administrative data

Given the small geographic areas in which Children's Ground works, external administrative data is rarely 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.

Population mapping, reach and engagement

Children's Ground's internal population mapping

Children's Ground recognises that there are limitations in accessing data for small community areas with specific boundaries, and that there are often challenges with under-representation of First Nations people in national and jurisdictional data collections. Therefore, internal population mapping is undertaken with each community to provide an in-depth understanding of the number of people living in or frequently visiting each community and family mobility.

Population mapping begins during the WTA CEP phase and is further developed during early-stage delivery. From this, population mapping reviews and monitoring continue to enable each community to monitor and track the proportion of the community, by key age groups, engaging with the CG Approach.

Over time, the service population is established with each community and combined as the regional population. This enables Children's Ground and communities to understand the progress made with growth and reach, year-on-year and across evaluation periods.

Children's Ground operates in communities with high population mobility due to a range of factors including housing, Sorry Business, infrastructure, health and other family and cultural responsibilities and circumstances. During any given evaluation period, new people became part of the service population, and some move outside of Children's Ground's community service areas for varying lengths of time.

These influences create variations in service populations and are monitored and managed through population mapping with each community. This also presents challenges in defining and tracking a consistent service population for impact measurement and to determine the reach of the CG Approach as a whole-of-community strategy.

To address this, individuals are assigned a 'residency status' as: Permanent residents; Frequent visitors; or Infrequent visitors, as reported by community-based staff and leaders. Children's Ground welcomes engagement of everyone within the communities, including visiting children and families, which adds to the challenges with population mapping in the initial years of delivery.

Building population data with communities includes regular cohort analysis processes to monitor changes and mobility. This can create variations in service populations over time as the data becomes more comprehensive.

During the WTA CEP and early-stage delivery phases, assigning a residency status for individuals relies heavily on the local knowledge of a small number of community-based staff. Therefore, early-stage population data should be read with caution.

Children's Ground's intention is for communities to review and update this data at least six-monthly as part of their community governance, planning and reporting processes. As relationships with community members increase over time, community governance engagement grows, as does community involvement in population mapping.

Across the Darwin communities, population mapping occurred inconsistently over the first four years, particularly throughout the community engagement years, significantly impacted by COVID-19 and limitations of growth model resourcing.

In 2024, a comprehensive population mapping exercise was undertaken to the extent that there is a high degree of confidence in the population data. Data reflecting reach and engagement proportions presented throughout the report is based on this data.

Service population and engagement data

When the full CG Approach is in place, Children's Ground's 'service population' is defined as permanent residents and frequent visitors only, this is also the case for how engagement is presented. However, within the growth model and in the early stages of delivery the service populations and engagement data include all people who live in and/or visit and stay in a community, frequently or infrequently.

During WTA CEP and early-stage delivery, this is a deliberate approach to ensure reach and engagement can be measured and monitored. As relationships with communities and delivery of the CG Approach build over time, a clearer 'service population' emerges. At this point, and when resources enable, population and engagement data will focus on the defined service population in each community.



Appendix 5: Research Advisory Group endorsement

September 2026
William Tilmouth & Evelyn Schaber
Chairs of the Board
Children's Ground

Dear William and Evelyn,

Re: Evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach in Darwin, 2020 to 2024

This first evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach in Darwin communities is an important milestone for your organisation because it has evidenced positive impact of the Approach in a vastly different cultural and geographical context. This evaluation is important both in the context of Darwin, and also more broadly in building the growing evidence base of the Children's Ground Approach as an alternative service system that can effect change.

As an independent body, our Research Advisory Group has reviewed this report and endorses this as a rigorous and robust evaluation and analysis of the small-scale Approach that has been established and delivered with Darwin communities over the evaluation period.

We want to express our congratulations to the First Nations leaders and team on undertaking and preparing a transparent evaluation report that shows some very positive progress in delivery and outcomes of the Approach, whilst not shying away from areas that did not progress as intended and that require improvement and ongoing effort.

The evaluation indicates that the Children's Ground Approach is transferable and that the core principles evidenced in other locations as drivers for change were also visible in the Darwin context. The adaptation and local design are a strength of the model that you have built in as a principle from the outset.

The report evaluates the Children's Ground Approach as implemented in a different context from the one in which it was developed, and with only partial funding of the full Children's Ground model. The urban context presented new realities, such as mobility from remote to urban environments, multiple language groups, intergenerational dislocation from Country and limited access to Elders. COVID-19 restrictions were also active during much of the evaluation period. Children's Ground in Darwin also operated in a policy and political environment that expects that communities can get all their needs met outside of their community by engaging in mainstream education, health and other services.

The focus on delivery outreach in communities has clearly been an effective principle. It has supported local governance, is valued by the communities it serves, and has been instrumental in the progress and outcomes evidenced. So too has the model's holistic focus, which provides flexible and responsive support to people and communities to tackle their big issues and priorities, whether COVID-19, sorry business or educational transport. These are the types of support that siloed individual funding grants could never focus on or address. This goes to the heart of why the model works.

The fact that the Children's Ground model has been evidenced as effective across different and very challenging contexts is one of the most critical findings from this and other evaluations. It is evident from all your evaluation reports that Children's Ground lives the principles of the model in practice across changing contexts. This has been shown to be a key part of the success and effectiveness of the model.

The report shows that you are trying to embed the full holistic systems reform model with largely programmatic funding that you're securing along the way, and this is a significant challenge. However, this evaluation shows that, despite this and other challenges, the model has still achieved positive change in key areas of employment of local people, self-determination, early childhood education, engaging young people in communities, and consistent delivery of health literacy and promotion.

As the Children's Ground journey has progressed over the last ten years, your own evaluations and external evaluations of the model have established a solid evidence base for how First Nations leadership in systems and service reform can be achieved and can change outcomes for children and families.

The findings from this evaluation are transformative, providing evidence of both the successes and the challenges of implementing a visionary community-led early childhood model in the context of short-term programmatic funding. The evaluation is also valuable as a social history account of a pioneering culturally informed approach to improving the life outcomes of some of Australia's most disadvantaged children.

Kind regards,

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