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



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.

We also sincerely thank the passionate and dedicated staff and volunteers who walk alongside families in Darwin to grow Children's Ground. Your unwavering commitment to advancing the rights of First Nations children, families, and communities is evident in everything you do. Your ongoing efforts to gather data and stories are vital to our ability to evaluate our work, demonstrate our impact, and contribute to broader systems change.

Children's Ground also acknowledges and thanks our family of communities, philanthropic partners, corporate supporters, and government funders. Your vision and support have created the space for innovation and systems reform led by First Nations leaders, families, and communities in Darwin. Beyond financial support, your respectful partnership has enabled Children's Ground to grow into a thriving First Nations organisation, one that is leading a transformative approach to securing a better future for the next generation.

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.

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.

Summary: Evaluation of Children's Ground in Garramilla (Darwin), 2020 to 2024: Baseline and early progress evaluation.

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Report Writing and Contributions: Jen Lorains, Manjusha K Sathiananthan, Jane Vadiveloo, Erin Reilly, Darwin First Nations Governance Committee, Regional Staff, and Shared Office Staff

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Children's Ground staff and volunteers

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

“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



Contents

Community voices 04
Summary of early-stage change and impact 06
Introduction 14
About the evaluation 20
Children's Ground in Garramilla (Darwin) 28
Evaluation findings –
Children's Ground early progress and impact 33
First Nations evaluation findings and analysis 34
Western evaluation findings and analysis 38
Systems analysis 73
Conclusions 80
Appendix 1: Research Advisory Group endorsement 85

Community voices





“

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

”

“

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, 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

”

“

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

”

“

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

”





“

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

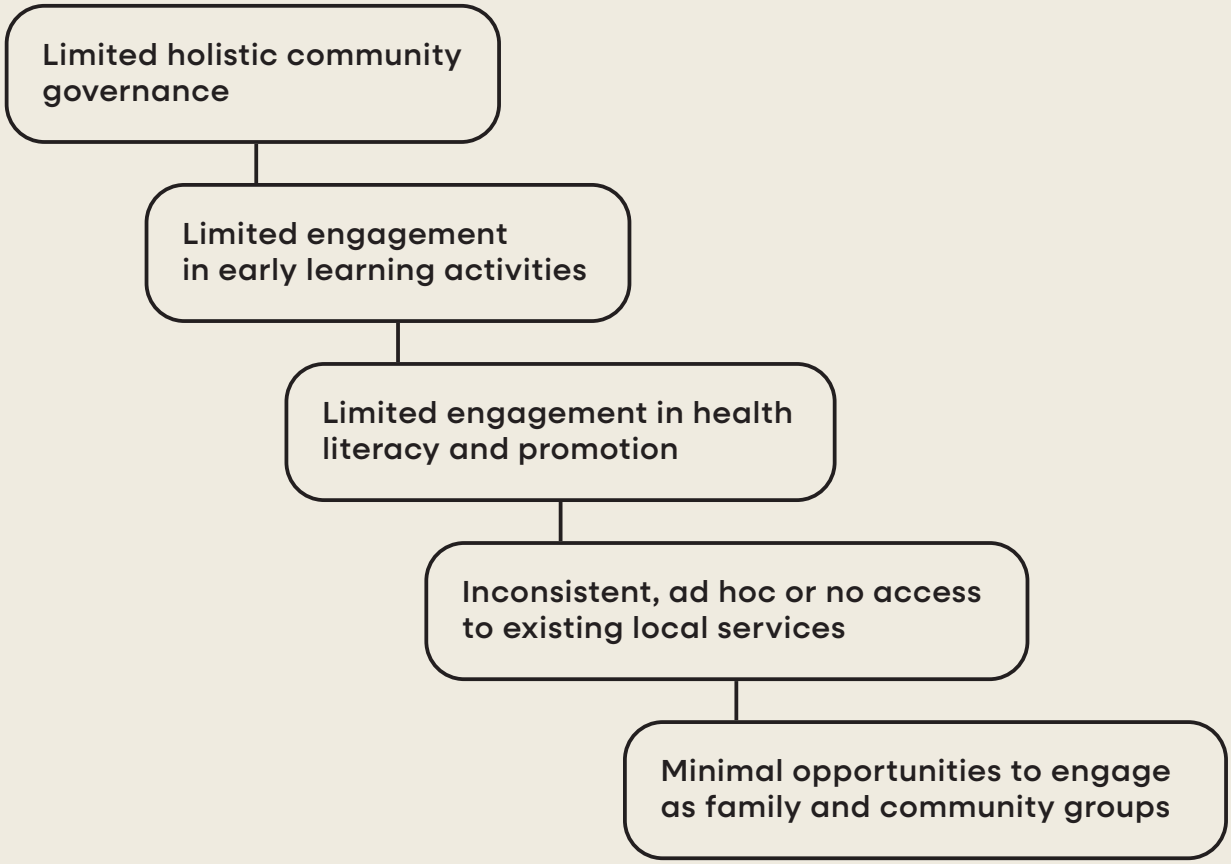
35-40 years, female,
First Nations staff/family member, 2024

”

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:



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.



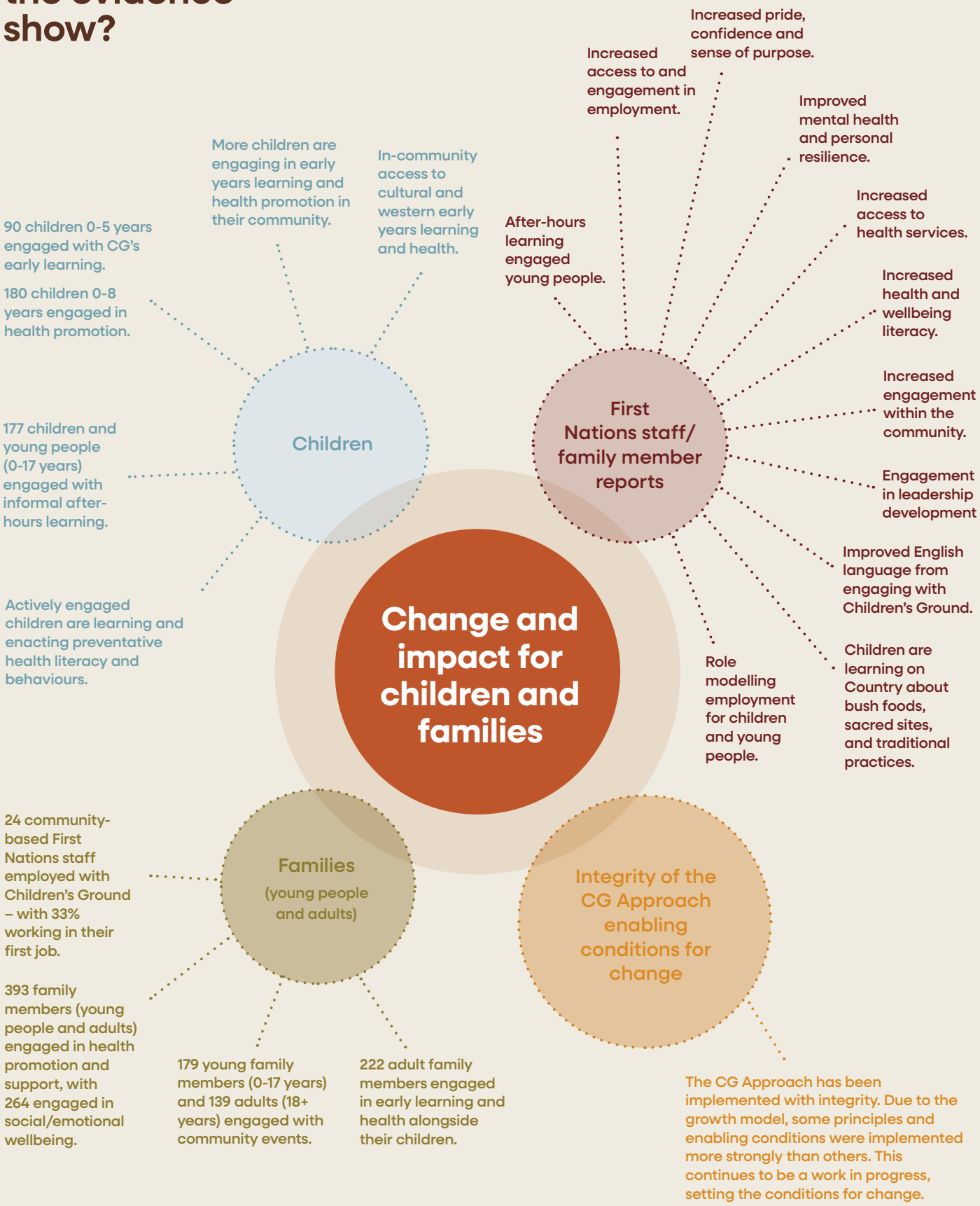
393
family members (young people and adults) engaged in health promotion and support. Including:

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
	**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.
	**Start early:** Early learning and health promotion have been delivered regularly in communities, with young children actively engaged.
	**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.
	**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.
	**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.

PROGRESS	SUMMARY OF PROGRESS
	**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.
	**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.
	**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.
	**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.
	**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.

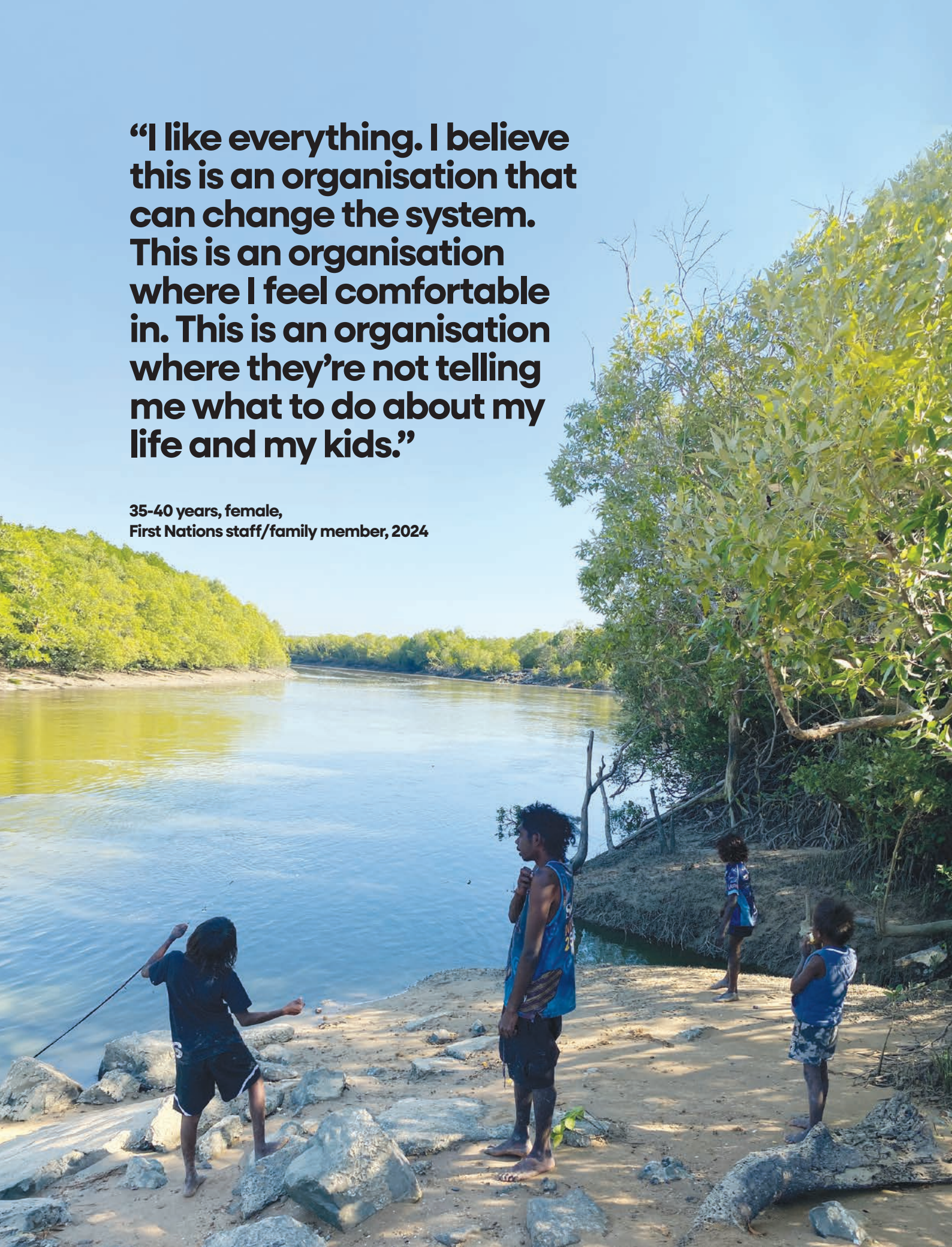
We need more training and education to empower. We need more young people governance. We are employing young people, but we need more of it.

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

Introduction

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.

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

This report presents the first baseline and early progress evaluation of the 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. It begins with Children's Ground's initial Walk, Talk and Act (WTA) Community Engagement and Planning phase[1] from 2020 to 2021 – referred to from here on as WTA – and moves into early-stage delivery of the CG Approach as a small-scale growth model 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 Evaluation Frameworks (impact evaluation), from both a cultural and western perspective.

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.

1 A period of family and community engagement that occurs before beginning delivery of the CG Approach with any community.



About Children's Ground

As an organisation, Children's Ground aims to uplift entire communities and future generations, to create a stronger, more empowered future, with First Nations people leading change.

The CG Approach is a 25-year strategy focused on creating lasting change led by First Nations communities. It centres First Nations systems of governance and knowledge, combining these with western leading practice and international evidence.

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

The CG Approach starts with children from birth (and pre-birth) and grows with them and their families through to adulthood. As a whole-of-community approach, it addresses the key social, cultural and economic determinants of wellbeing through an integrated and preventative service system that combines culture, education, health, employment, community and economic development in design, delivery and evaluation.

The CG Approach is tailored to the specific needs of communities to ensure children and their families can enjoy a life of opportunity.

Recognising that transformative change takes time, the CG Approach prioritises long-term sustained investment and commitment.

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



Each of these is expanded in Figure 1.

The CG Approach has five Integrated Delivery areas, depicted in Figure 1 as yellow bars. These are the services delivered in each community through the CG Approach. The aim of the CG Approach is to ensure that First Nations children and families have access to each of these services through a culturally centred design. Each is a key determinant to lifelong wellbeing and is interdependent.

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

The foundation of the CG Approach is five Service Reform areas, represented in Figure 1 by the orange bars. They are the necessary conditions to achieve and sustain change over time. They are fundamental to Systems and Service Reform and are necessary for driving transformative change.

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

See full evaluation report and Children's Ground's website (https://childrensground.org.au) for further details about the CG Approach in practice.

Figure 1

The Children's Ground Approach





CHILD, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY TOGETHER

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

This Approach aspires to achieve excellence, recognising that children, families and communities who need the most deserve the best. This can only be achieved by ensuring that First Nations communities shape their own futures.

The long-term vision is to evidence a system that empowers local communities to achieve sustained change for future generations.

Small-scale growth model

In Darwin communities, Children's Ground did not have the financial resources required to deliver the full CG Approach.

After the success of the CG Approach growth model (see Box 1) 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 model as resources increased.

During this evaluation period, there was a modest increase in resources and delivery – however, not to the level required to deliver the full CG Approach. The impact of this is evident and noted throughout the full evaluation report.

This report establishes a baseline for longitudinal monitoring and evaluation and evaluates the processes and impact of early-stage delivery within the context of the growth model. Some evaluation progress indicators have been 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.

Box 1: 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.


NIKE

A different delivery environment

Darwin was a new delivery context for the CG Approach. Its geography, population patterns and cultural connections differ from Children's Ground's other regions, as do the legacy of historical policy, its service landscape and its community governance arrangements.

In Central Australia and West Arnhem Land, the CG Approach has been implemented with communities that are culturally and linguistically related – from the same Nation, or neighbouring Nations with shared cultural law and relationships. Darwin communities, by contrast, are largely culturally and linguistically independent of each other, though some cultural connections exist.

As an urban environment, Darwin is highly colonised, with many First Nations people experiencing significant disruptions to language, connection to Country and culture through systemic racism embedded in policies and institutions. Population mobility in some communities saw whole family groups moving in and out of communities during the evaluation period.

These differences shaped how the CG Approach was designed, implemented and experienced by each community. They highlighted the critical importance of ongoing community engagement and leadership throughout planning, implementation and delivery.

Darwin also gave Children's Ground the opportunity to evaluate the scalability and adaptability of the CG Approach, and its impact, in a more urban setting. Because many of the effects of colonisation experienced by First Nations people in Darwin are shared by communities in cities and regional centres across Australia, the evidence emerging from Darwin may have broader national implications.

In all contexts, the CG Approach recognises that lasting change is driven by communities themselves, grounded in empowerment and culture, and sustained over the long term.



About the evaluation

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This is the first evaluation of Children's Ground in Darwin, capturing baseline and early progress from 2020 to 2024 across three communities.

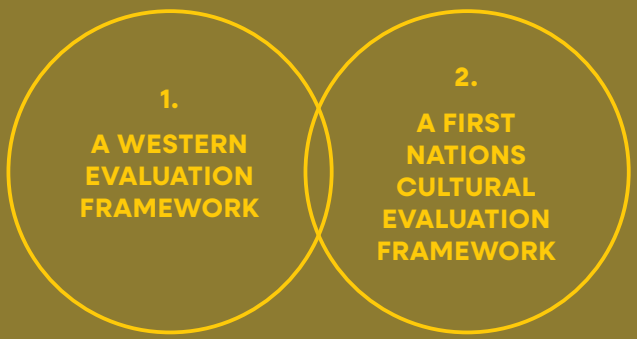
During this period, Children's Ground undertook the WTA phase, then proceeded to early-stage implementation of the CG Approach in three communities.

This evaluation prioritised First Nations data and evaluation sovereignty. It was undertaken by both western trained non-First Nations and First Nations evaluators, in line with key research and evaluation principles developed with First Nations leaders. This approach mitigates (but does not fully remove) the risk of cultural bias, cultural assumptions, and analytical and linguistic practices that may contribute to ongoing harm and colonisation, too often seen in research involving First Nations people and communities.[2] [3]

↓

Evaluation frameworks

This evaluation reports progress against two longitudinal evaluation frameworks:



The evaluation includes both cultural and western analysis, presented against these frameworks.

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

3 Drawson, A. S., Toombs, E., & Mushquash, C. J. (2017). Indigenous Research Methods: A Systematic Review. The International Indigenous Policy Journal, 8(2). DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.5

Western evaluation framework

Children's Ground's 25-year longitudinal western evaluation framework has ten long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community, outlined in Figure 2. Progress indicators are attached to each outcome to measure change and impact over 25 years of the CG Approach. See the full evaluation report for details about progress measures.

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. Long-term community outcomes are not expected to emerge at this early stage of operations.

Figure 2

Children's Ground's western Evaluation Framework

Aspiration	Outcomes			
Children are thriving – engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities.	Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures	Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers	Children are healthy	Children are happy
Families feel confident about their children's wellbeing and future. They feel involved and empowered in their children's learning, wellbeing and development and their own ability to create environments of safety.	Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development	Families are economically strong	Families are healthy and socially strong	
Communities enjoy economic, cultural and social strength and opportunity. Local governance is strong and inclusive. People care for each other and provide a safe environment for every child.	The community feels empowered and celebrates its cultural, social and economic wellbeing	The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity	The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity	

First Nations Community and Cultural evaluation framework

Children's Ground's First Nations Community and Cultural evaluation framework, outlined in Figure 3, represents evaluation priorities from a community and cultural perspective.

See the complete descriptions in the full evaluation report.

Figure 3

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.



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. 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 are walking and they're just getting stronger and stronger and bigger. It also shows that everyone takes different steps.



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.



LILY PADS: COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

There are eight lily pads around the middle. They represent freshwater and each lily pad represents things that are important for the communities.



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.



SHAPES ALONG THE LINES: 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. We must always go back to our Elders and old people. And our ancestors for guidance for everything.



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 and some eat salt water. We want our people to be stronger. Staying strong and healthy.



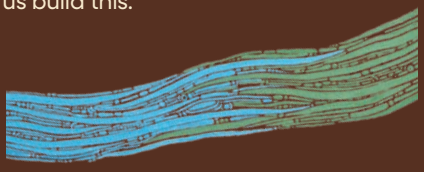
RIPPLES: OUR GOVERNANCE

These lines 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.



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.



WAVES: THE LONG JOURNEY

The waves represent the freshwater and saltwater people. It is the 25-year journey that we are in with Children's Ground, we are here for the long journey. The waves represent Children's Ground and this journey is never a smooth story. It's up and down. 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.





“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

Evaluation Method

This evaluation applied a mixed methods Participatory Action Research approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

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The report evaluates process effectiveness against Children's Ground's ten practice principles, which describe how the CG Approach is delivered. It also assesses early change and impact against progress measures and long-term outcomes for children, families and communities outlined in the cultural and western evaluation frameworks. In addition, the contribution of Children's Ground's systems reform on process and impact evaluation findings has also been analysed.

Data collection that informed this evaluation includes:

Activity and participation data:
Children's Ground activity and participation data covering 940 First Nations people across the three communities.

Interviews and focus groups:
50 participants, comprising 19 First Nations staff and family members, 12 western-trained staff (4 First Nations, 8 non-First Nations) and 19 practitioners from local service providers.

Most Significant Change:
29 individual stories of change collected using this participatory evaluation method.

Previous employment survey:
an internal survey completed by 24 First Nations community-based staff.

Data analysis approaches included:

First Nations community cultural analysis, undertaken by 11 First Nations staff from the communities leading Children's Ground in Darwin. Staff analysed de-identified qualitative data from evaluation interviews with First Nations families and community-based staff. Their analysis informed findings against the communities' cultural evaluation framework.

Process evaluation against Children's Ground's ten practice principles. Evaluative judgements have been made to determine whether delivery of each principle was:

On track and effective

Not yet on track
(strengthening required)

Not on track.

Impact evaluation against Children's Ground's progress indicators for Child, Family and Community-level outcomes. A contribution analysis method was used, drawing on:

- Analysis of community-reported service access and engagement before Children's Ground.
- Quantitative analysis of internal administrative data.
- Qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews.
- Most Significant Change stories.
- First Nations qualitative thematic analysis of interviews.

Systems analysis using a causal pathways approach. This assessed the extent to which systems reform contributed to early change and impact for children and families, and whether Children's Ground's Theory of Change for the Darwin region held true in practice. A final analysis then considered Children's Ground's contribution towards broader systems reform.

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 1.

First Nations family and community voices (quotes) are presented extensively throughout the full evaluation report as evidence. 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.

This is part of Children's Ground's commitment to ensuring that First Nations voices and perspectives are privileged and accurately represented.

Children's Ground in Garramilla (Darwin)

The CG Approach is designed to work with a group of communities in a region. Each community leads the design, governance, delivery and evaluation of the Approach in their local context, while collectively contributing to regional level governance, shared learnings and impact.

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

Knuckey Lagoon:
Located approx. 15km from the centre of Darwin.

15 Mile:
Located near Palmerston, approx. 25km from the centre of Darwin.

Minmarama / Kulaluk[4]:
Located approx. 7km from the centre of Darwin and home to a group of Larrakia Traditional Owners.

↓

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.

4 To date, delivery of the CG Approach has focused 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.

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, now governed under colonial laws and home to a broad range of language and cultural groups.

Many First Nations people are living with the intense impacts of colonisation, including the displacement from their traditional lands, cultural fragmentation through institutional policies, invasion and settlement patterns, and ongoing systemic exclusion in housing, economy, governance, and urban space. [5] [6] Systemic racism embedded in institutions has created conditions where cultural authority is undermined, and community cohesion is strained. [7] [8]

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, centre, develop and express culture in many ways.

The three communities leading the CG Approach in Darwin differ in their connection to traditional lands. In one community, families live on their traditional lands. In the other two, most families do not, and their populations include people from many languages and Nations. One of these two communities also experiences high population mobility.

All three communities experience the impact of the Stolen Generations, and all three talked about the significant disruption to their knowledge of and connection to their first language, cultural practice and Country.

The communities leading the CG Approach are formally identified as Town Camps. There are 43 Town Camps across the Northern Territory, including six in Darwin. [9]

Town Camps 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.

There is a long history of First Nations people living in Town Camps experiencing disproportionate health, economic and social challenges[10] [11], driving health inequities and social exclusion, despite a strong history of community governance and advocacy for self-determination. [12] [13]

Some Town Camp communities were originally established as temporary settlements for people from remote communities. While these communities now have a population of permanent residents, some continue to have highly transient populations.

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12 GMJAU (Goldfields Migrant Justice Action Unit). (2018). A tale of (at least) three reports: Agency and discourse in the Alice Springs Town Camps.
13 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.

Population mobility is not unique to Darwin communities. However, there are differences in the nature of mobility compared with other Children's Ground delivery regions. In Darwin, mobility often included new and different family groups moving into and out of communities for extended periods of time. In contrast, mobility in other delivery regions tends to involve the movement of the same or related family groups for shorter durations. Such significant mobility was observed particularly when the COVID-19 restrictions lessened. This significantly impacted service design, delivery, continuity and sustainability. It required an ongoing need to engage and develop relationships with new families when they move into communities. The impact of this mobility on achieving the long-term outcomes of the CG Approach will be important to understand and evaluate over the 25-year period.

Darwin communities before Children's Ground

Darwin is a broadly well-serviced capital city. Yet during the WTA phase, families in all three communities reported challenges accessing health, early learning and after-hours services and programs, both within their communities and outside them.

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 services' perspective, organisations reported being too stretched and under-resourced to provide 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.

Darwin baseline community profiles can be found in the full evaluation report.



Establishing and growing the CG Approach in Darwin

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

In January 2020, community-based First Nations staff were employed from each community. The WTA continued into 2021. COVID-19 occurring during this period created an environment of uncertainty for many people. During this time, Children's Ground provided COVID health promotion and support which became part of the 'Act' within the WTA as a key stated priority for each community.

In 2022, communities began transitioning from WTA into early-stage delivery of the CG Approach.

From the outset, Children's Ground did not have the financial resources to deliver the full CG Approach in the Darwin communities. However, 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' delivery in the three Darwin communities, closely monitoring the following risks:

- Community engagement and expectations.
- Community governance and leadership.
- The unknown time frame for growth and limited financial resources for extensive growth, including inadequate resources to meet demand.
- The impact of the growth model on the operational integrity and quality of the CG Approach as compared to delivery of the full CG Approach.
- Evaluation challenges due to the growth model.

The aim was that the growth model could evolve and grow towards the full model as financial resources increased. The growth model continued throughout the evaluation period with financial resources and delivery increasing modestly – however, not to the level required to address need or deliver the full CG Approach.

As a 25-year strategy, progress and outcomes of the CG Approach are mapped out in key stages, including the intent and focus within each stage and periods of time (see the full evaluation report for further information). Within a growth model these are adapted over each stage to match growth in funding and delivery.

See the full evaluation report for further information about the extent and pace of growth in financial resources and delivery of the CG Approach growth model.

"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


Bega
TASTY

Evaluation findings – Children's Ground early progress and impact

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

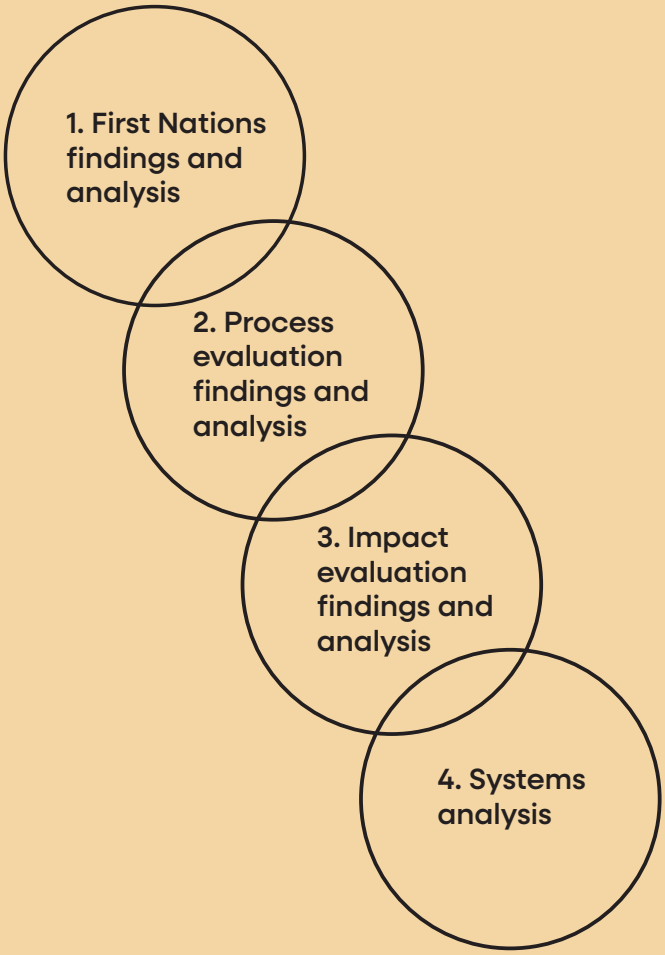
Access and engagement are two fundamental progress indicators over the first 1-3 years of early-stage CG Approach delivery. Under a growth model, access and engagement take longer to establish and build on.

The evaluation responds to three high-level questions, covering process effectiveness, the impact of the CG Approach and system reform:

1. **Process evaluation:** Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended?
2. **Impact evaluation:** What progress has been made towards the long-term evaluation outcomes?
3. **Systems analysis:** What system enablers contributed to implementation effectiveness and any early progress towards impact (Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, evaluation)? What contribution was made towards broader 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.

This section is structured as follows:



First Nations findings and analysis

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

Understanding each of its parts and how they intersect will provide insight into the framework's holistic method.

What the icons represent:

→

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, kids are empowered, there is hope, aspiration, we want to be a better community.

Children's Ground being place-based was very seasonal, based on if there were community staff to work that day or sometimes we are out on our homelands and not working, whether Children's Ground staff feel safe to go out without community staff. Also there has been a lot happening in the community like we go through sorry business a lot. In one community being in community is a challenge without infrastructure. Without proper infrastructure delivering in community has not been that good so far, but we're moving towards that. But no matter what, we make things happen.

Working with Children's Ground we feel pride, feeling good, the confidence, the trust, fun and happy. We need more opportunity for everyone to work and participate. Every voice matters.



RIPPLES: OUR GOVERNANCE

Children's Ground is community-led. The leadership is in community. We do governance every day. Community decision making, governance, planning, planning for the long term, deciding services. Community makes every decision – being collective together. Children's Ground respects and follows community and cultural protocols. There's respect for community decisions.

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, the community staff, need to be the strong ones to help support our community.

Local people know and they are the decision makers. Everything needs to come from everyone. It's not one voice, it's all voices, all voices matters.





LINE CONNECTING THE CIRCLES: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE COMMUNITIES

SHAPES ALONG THE LINE: ELDERS

FIRE IN THE CENTRE: OUR STRENGTH AND HEALING

For many of us, Darwin is home but not our Country. And that's [one of] the cultural learning challenges. 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. 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 teach that to our kids. And it actually frames everything that we're doing... And why we're doing it.

The lines means that we, communities want to collaborate, work together, we want to share stories and sit on all our countries. 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. But we need more.



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 language resources for different languages. We need language and cultural learning for young people and adults.

We need more after-hours education. 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 want to do more walk and talk [family and community engagement]. Every house needs more kids involved, need walk and talk consistently. Consistency with community is big.

We need more in our money story to help us engage more families in everything.



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. That's going good. Young women group is happening, kids learning about health, families are learning to do recipes too.

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

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 need more health support with social and emotional wellbeing. A lot of teenagers need support for social and emotional wellbeing activities. Women's group needs to do more and we need Men's groups too.

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

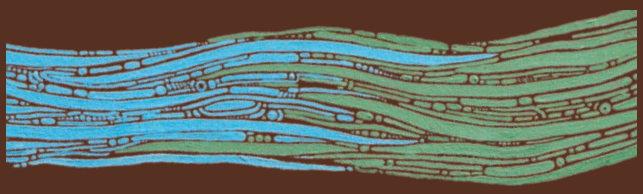


LEAVES OUTSIDE THE CIRCLES: MONEY STORY AND SUPPORT FROM EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

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. Children's Ground helps because it's working with community. It is an organisation within the community that branches out to the other stakeholders.

For community, for services, government and stakeholders... 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 are talking and talking, but we need action now. We need these mob [local services] to listen to us and do action.



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 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.

Children's Ground is 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. 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.

Western evaluation findings and analysis

This section presents evaluation evidence in relation to Children's Ground's process/implementation effectiveness and early-stage change and impact for children and families.

This section begins with presenting a picture of Darwin communities before Children's Ground started to provide context for implementation progress and early-stage change and impact.

During the WTA phase and throughout early-stage delivery, communities provided information about service access and engagement (e.g. health, learning, etc) and community structures and environments (e.g. governance, infrastructure, etc.). The information gathered from communities is presented here as the regional baseline.

Evaluation findings are drawn from the collective experiences of families across the three distinct communities. While findings are reported at a regional level, implementation and impact of the CG Approach occurred within communities with differing histories, strengths, priorities, governance arrangements, levels of participation and cultural contexts.

These contextual differences influenced how the CG practice principles were experienced and enacted within each community and the extent to which early-stage change and impact was observed and reported.



Baseline: Before Children's Ground

On track and effective Not yet on track Not on track.

COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT	COMMUNITY 1	COMMUNITY 2	COMMUNITY 3
Access to a fit-for-purpose intergenerational community centre?	Not yet on track	Not yet on track	Not on track.
Established community and cultural governance protocols and processes?	Not yet on track	Not on track.	Not yet on track
A community plan outlining their aspirations, needs and goals?	Not yet on track	Not on track.	Not on track.
Regular community events and celebrations?	Not yet on track	Not yet on track	Not on track.
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT			
Access to employment opportunities in their community?	Not yet on track	Not yet on track	Not on track.
Access to economic opportunities, other than employment?	Not on track.	Not on track.	Not on track.
LEARNING AND WELLBEING			
Access to early years learning in their community?	Not yet on track	Not on track.	Not on track.
Were a majority of children engaging with early years learning?	Not yet on track	Not yet on track	Not on track.
Access to regular after-hours activities?	Not yet on track	Not on track.	Not on track.
Were a majority of children and young people engaging with after-hours activities?	Not yet on track	Not on track.	Not on track.
HEALTH AND WELLBEING			
Access to health promotion in their community?	Not yet on track	Not yet on track	Not on track.
Were a majority of people engaging with health promotion?	Not on track.	Not on track.	Not on track.
Were community members easily accessing local health clinics?	Not yet on track	Not on track.	Not yet on track
CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT AND WELLBEING			
Were the majority of people in the community living on their traditional lands/country?	Not on track.	Not on track.	On track and effective
Were a majority of people engaging with cultural practices?	Not yet on track	Not yet on track	Not yet on track

Process evaluation

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Has the CG Approach been implemented as intended?

This section assesses the process effectiveness of the CG Approach by evaluating the extent to which the ten practice principles have been implemented effectively and as intended within the growth model limitations.

Activity and delivery data presented covers the early-stage delivery period from 2022 to 2024, unless otherwise stated.

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See the full evaluation report for detailed descriptions of each principle and what elements have been evaluated within each principle.

→

Evaluation of implementation of the ten practice principles

This evaluation found that delivery within some principles is progressing well, while others have been compromised by the limited resources of the growth model.



ON TRACK

PROGRESSING

NOT ON TRACK

Child, family & community-led

> "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 to start with."
>
> *35-40 years, female,*
> *First Nations staff/family member, 2024*

Over the first five years of communities delivering the CG Approach, regional and community-level First Nations governance have been established and are reportedly following cultural governance protocols. Community governance has reportedly been stronger than regional governance.

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 two communities, governance has included many people. In the third community it has been held largely by a few key people.

Community empowerment and leadership is on track and being implemented effectively, within the context of the growth model. Increasing the breadth of engagement in all levels of governance remains a high priority; however, this requires adequate resourcing.

Start early

> "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 bases, and then once they turn that age into kindergarten or transition, they have a good headspace, they up there, and they have good manners."
>
> *45-50 years, female,*
> *First Nations staff/family member, 2024*

Since Children's Ground started and has grown, early learning and health promotion have been delivered regularly in communities, with young children actively engaged. However levels and frequency of engagement varied across communities.

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

This principle has been implemented effectively within the resource limitation of the growth model. Increasing child and family engagement and consistency in delivery is a key priority.

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*

Building towards working with a critical mass (75%) of children and their families has been a key priority. 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.

To make further progress with this principle, increased resourcing is required to enable extensive community engagement, increase community-based employment and increase in-community presence and delivery.

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*

In-community place-based delivery occurred in all three communities but not to the extent intended.

In two communities, Children's Ground refurbished existing community centres to make them accessible, suitable for delivery and equipped with adequate working spaces, enabling place-based delivery. One community still has no community centre infrastructure adequate for full place-based delivery.

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

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

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*

Overall, this principle has been implemented to the extent intended within the limitations of the growth model.

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 areas. Also, effective collaborations with some local services have been established and strengthened over time. This has contributed to enabling and enhancing delivery for Children's Ground and local services.

Both internal integration and collaboration with local services collectively contributed to reduced service access barriers for actively engaged children and families. However, both require increased resourcing and strengthening to effectively implement the intended holistic, wraparound and integrated local service system.

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 ..."
>
> *45-50 years, female,*
> *First Nations staff/family member, 2024*

Cultural and western delivery has occurred in all three communities, with cultural delivery influenced by each community's distinct cultural context.

Over the first five years, the number of cultural community-based employment roles across key delivery areas of the CG Approach has increased, resulting in greater capacity for cultural delivery alongside western-based delivery. This grew over time as funding resources increased.

Each community planned and led cultural teaching and learning with children, young people and adults, based on their own context and pace. Notwithstanding the impact of colonisation on cultural life, communities are strongly committed to cultural learning and cultural revitalisation for children. This commitment drives a continual process of innovation, increasing access to First Nations cultural and global knowledge for the next generation of leaders.

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 1000%."
>
> *35-40 years, female,*
> *First Nations staff/family member, 2024*

Establishing and embedding cultural and western standards, processes and policies that can enable excellence in delivery of the CG Approach is an ongoing focus within a limited growth model.

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, has been enacted through this and all other principles.

Assume and celebrate ability

> "We do. Because that's something we tell them [community]. 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 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 employment 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*

Cultural safety can only be evaluated by people from communities who live and experience it.

Almost all community-based 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 work environments.

Stay for the long-term

> "We've got the 25-year approach. That's not going anywhere."
>
> *45-50 years, female,*
> *First Nations staff/family member, 2024*

In Darwin communities, the CG Approach is in its early days, being three years into a 25-year approach. Given the small scale growth model delivery, it is too early to genuinely assess progress against this principle.

In the short term, 'Stay for the long-term' has been embraced as a key strength, underpinning the community's confidence, trust and commitment to engage.

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.

How effectively each principle was implemented significantly influenced the extent to which early change and impact were achieved with children and families.



“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

Impact evaluation



Has progress been made towards long-term outcomes?

This section presents early indications of impact of the CG Approach for children, families, and communities during the evaluation period. Given that delivery of the CG Approach in Darwin is only in its infancy, under a significantly limited growth model, extensive impact is not expected at this stage.

Children's Ground's 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.

The section summarises key findings in relation to the following long-term outcome areas, as articulated in Children's Ground's western evaluation framework:

- **Change and impact for children**
- **Change and impact for families**
- **Change and impact for communities** – focusing on community aspirations, contexts and the foundations and building blocks for long-term change identified through progress in Child and Family level outcomes.

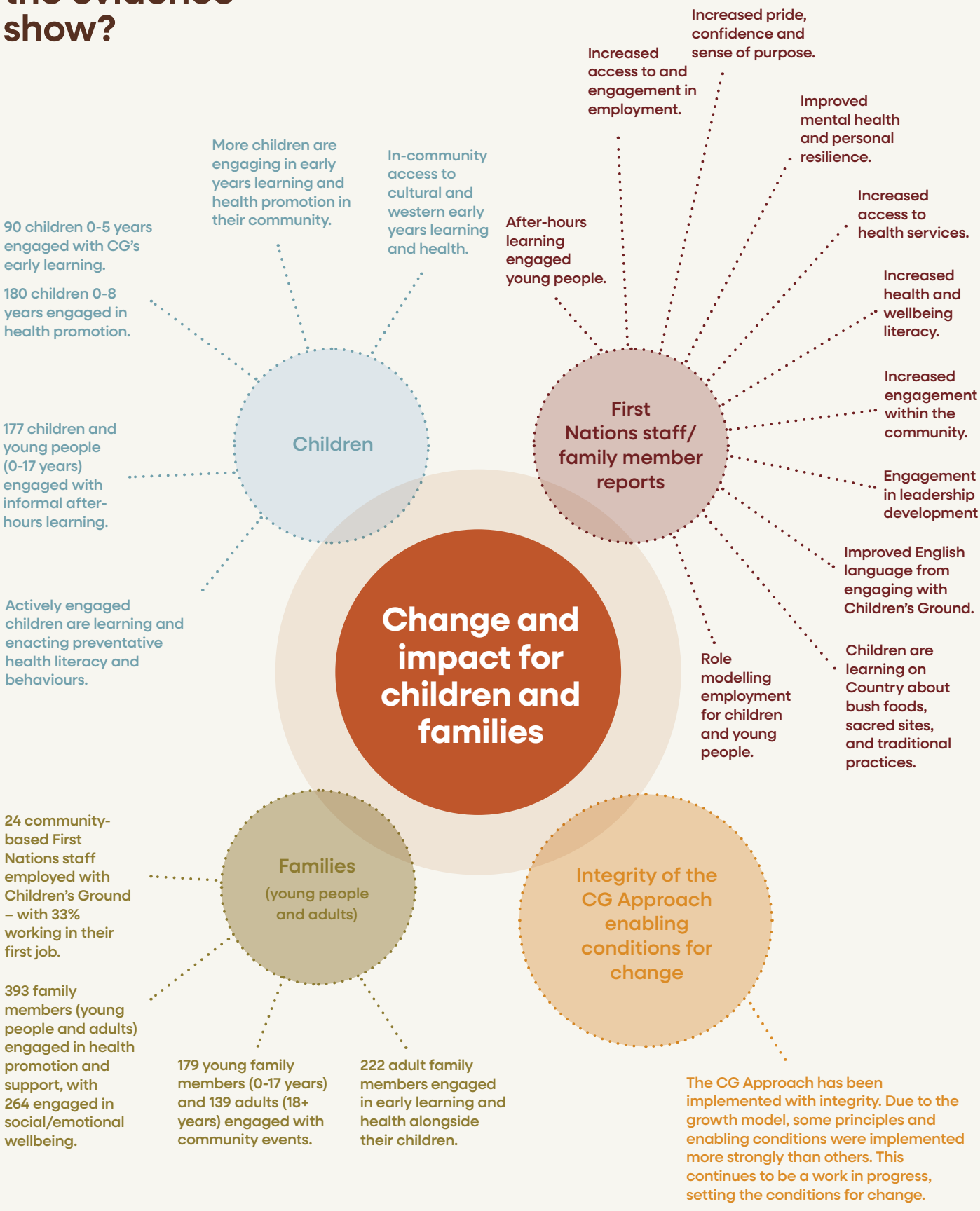
This begins with a summary of early-stage change and impact. Key evaluation findings are then presented against the key outcome for children and families, including some Most Significant Change stories.

See the full evaluation report for the western evaluation framework progress indicators within each outcome for early-stage delivery.

Impact evaluation data presented covers the early-stage delivery period from 2022 to 2024, unless otherwise stated. This is the period following the WTA phase.

Impact findings should be read alongside the process findings on how effectively the ten practice principles have been implemented. These principles form the enabling conditions and environments for achieving short-, medium- and long-term change.

What does the evidence show?



Key findings:

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Change and impact for Children



“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

“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.

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

From 2022 to 2024, 90 children aged 0-5 years engaged with Children's Ground's early learning.

Across the years, there were increases and decreases in engagement that are consistent with what is expected in early-stage delivery, significant community population changes and impact of COVID-19.

In evaluation interviews with First Nations community-based staff and family members, most people reported that the early years sessions are going well.

During early-stage delivery, English has been the primary language of instruction in early years learning, as Aboriginal language revitalisation takes time to build. Staff/family members reported improvements in children's English language and western learning outcomes as a result of 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

More children actively engaged in early years learning – children who had rarely or never previously engaged.

> "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

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 that served as informal intergenerational learning environments. This included 121 young people aged 6-17 years, who were the target group for delivery.

For some children and families, after-hours activities provided a different pathway to engage young children in early learning and adults in employment and community governance.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations community- based staff and family members reported:

> "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

Some after-hours programs were facilitated in collaboration with other organisations. In these cases, Children's Ground supported other local services/programs to engage with communities, increasing community access to a wider range of services.

Across both early years and after-hours learning, increasing the engagement of family members remains a focus for each community.





Outcome summary

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground has provided children and young people with in-community access to both formal early years learning and informal after-hours learning activities.

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 and learning more broadly as a key preventative pathway critical to long-term impact.

Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures

From 2022 to 2024, 76 children aged 0-8 years engaged in cultural learning through early years and after-hours learning sessions, with 71 engaging in on-Country learning. On-Country Learning is core to the Children's Ground Learning and Wellbeing Framework as the key learning practice for First Nations systems of education.

The increases and decreases in engagement are consistent with that seen in other delivery areas. Over time, community designed and led cultural learning has strengthened; however this remains an area for growth and improvement in both delivery and engagement.

Findings from evaluation interviews with First Nations staff and family members identified that Children's Ground's cultural learning delivery, particularly on-Country learning, was widely valued by community members. People reported:

> "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

Children are learning and developing in their first language and culture.

> "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

> "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 community staff member, 2024

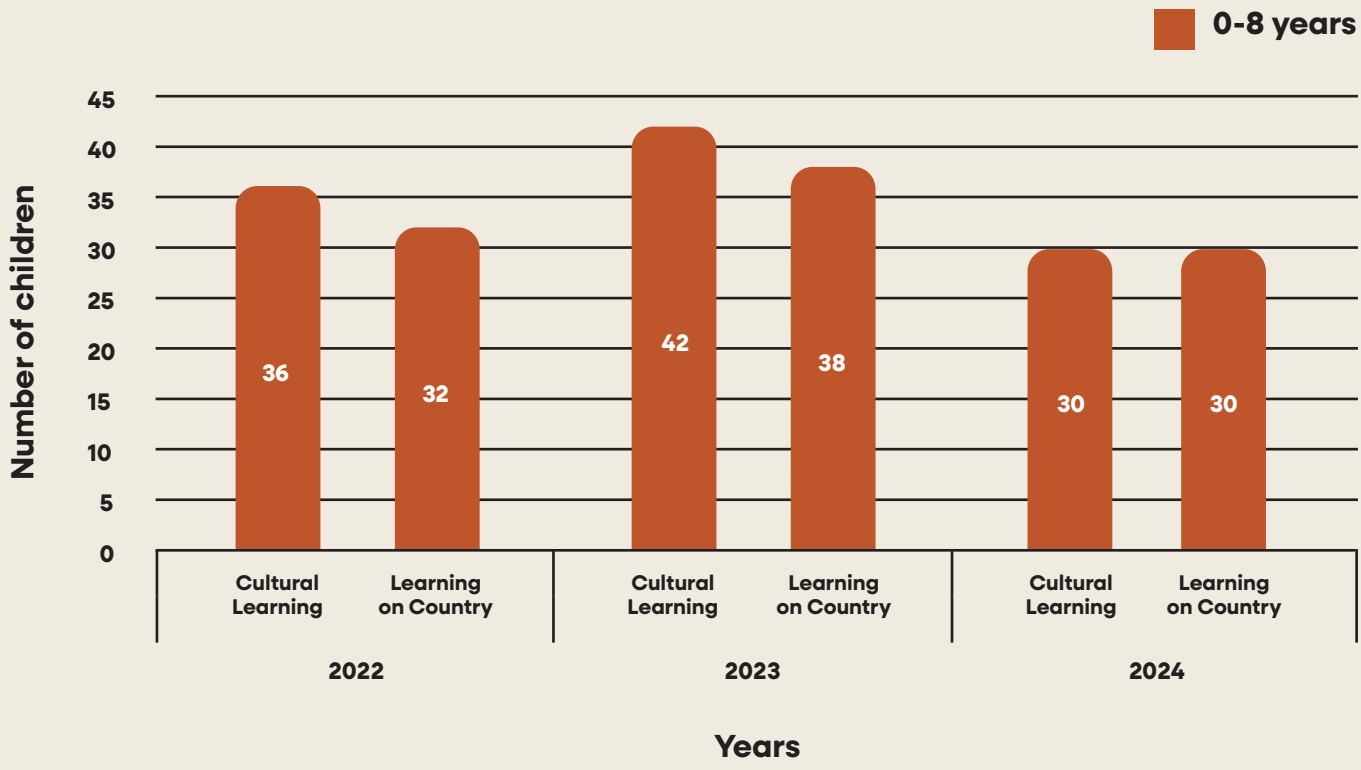
Most staff/family members reported that more cultural learning is required, particularly on-Country learning.

Each community is revitalising culture and language in a context of significant oppression and cultural damage. First Nations leaders have regularly discussed the impact of colonisation and Stolen Generations disrupting cultural and first language learning for many families.

First Nations cultural and language learning must be led by the right people for that land and language. Communities reported struggles with a lack of Elders and cultural and language knowledge holders, people not living on Country and challenges associated with teaching children when there are so many diverse language and cultural backgrounds in each community.

Graph 1

Number of children 0-8 years engaged in cultural and on-Country learning, by year



Outcome summary

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that on-Country learning is occurring and is valued. First cultural and Aboriginal language learning is occurring within Children's Ground learning sessions. However, families had different perspectives about how regularly this occurred.

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.

Children are healthy and happy

From 2022 to 2024, 180 children aged 0-8 years actively engaged in health and wellbeing promotion and support, including: healthy routines (teeth cleaning, nose blowing, hand and face washing); nutritional intake and education; physical health; social/emotional wellbeing; cultural health practices; and health checks involving their families.

Health promotion is integrated into all early years and after-hours learning sessions through both education and activities. For example, children learn about nutrition and help prepare and cook healthy meals. Figure 4 shows the type of health promotion and the number of children engaged.

Figure 4

Number of children 0-8 years engaged in types of health promotion.



Actively engaged children are learning preventative health literacy and behaviours.

"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.

Collaborative health delivery with Children's Ground and local services

Children's Ground is deliberately not a clinical health service. Focus on prevention includes support for children and their families to engage in local clinical health services.

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. See Box 2 for an example of collaborative health delivery.

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.

> "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

> "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 community staff, 2024

> "Well, my kids, they all... had [various health issues]. And from Children's Ground, they helped us with the clinic and all. And now they've got no hospital, no medicine."

35-40 years, female,
First Nations community 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 Danila Dilba, last week we had them hearing mob come out for kids."

30-35 years, female,
First Nations community staff, 2024

Some families were not aware of health promotion occurring within or outside of learning sessions, which is consistent with the extent of their engagement in the CG Approach. This further demonstrates the need for broader family and community engagement.

Outcome summary

Children's Ground has increased access to and engagement in preventative health support 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 in early years and after-hours learning sessions provided consistent delivery of and engagement in health promotion. This enabled actively engaged children to learn about healthy foods, healthy behaviours and illness prevention from their earliest years.

Relationships with local services contributed to child engagement in important clinical health checks, which were available in their community through service collaborations.

Evidence of increased access, engagement, health literacy and healthy behaviours reflects the short-term changes expected from early-stage delivery of a growth model.

Key findings:

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Change and impact for Families



“Yeah, we 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 best job in the world”

– 35-40 years, 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.

Families are economically strong

Increasing First Nations employment.

People from communities working in and with their community.

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 have been employed with Children's Ground. This increased from eight in 2020 to 20 by 2024.

Of the community-based staff, 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.

Increased community-based First Nations employment has been enabled by Children's Ground's flexible 'no barriers' employment model, which is designed to remove access barriers and has a non-punitive approach. Details about Children's Ground's flexible employment model can be found in the full evaluation report.

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 and from evaluation interviews with First Nations community-based staff.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations community-based staff reported that Children's Ground has created culturally safe, flexible jobs that encouraged community members to work in roles that aligned with their strengths and cultural and family responsibilities, and that this flexibility and support contributes to their ability to remain engaged and consistent to their roles.

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.

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 as individuals and for their family. Financial stability from employment was also noted by some staff, who also connected this to improved family wellbeing.

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."

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

"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

One local service provider reflected:

"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 provider, 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.

Outcome summary

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground's flexible, 'no barriers' employment model has been a significant enabler for community-based employment, including engaging people who had little or no history of paid employment.

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 economic opportunities within each community has resulted in people feeling proud, with increased confidence in employment and speaking up. For some community staff, their employment has positively impacted their personal and family circumstances.

Families are healthy and socially strong

Children's Ground's holistic and integrated approach enables families to engage with health promotion and support for a range of reasons.

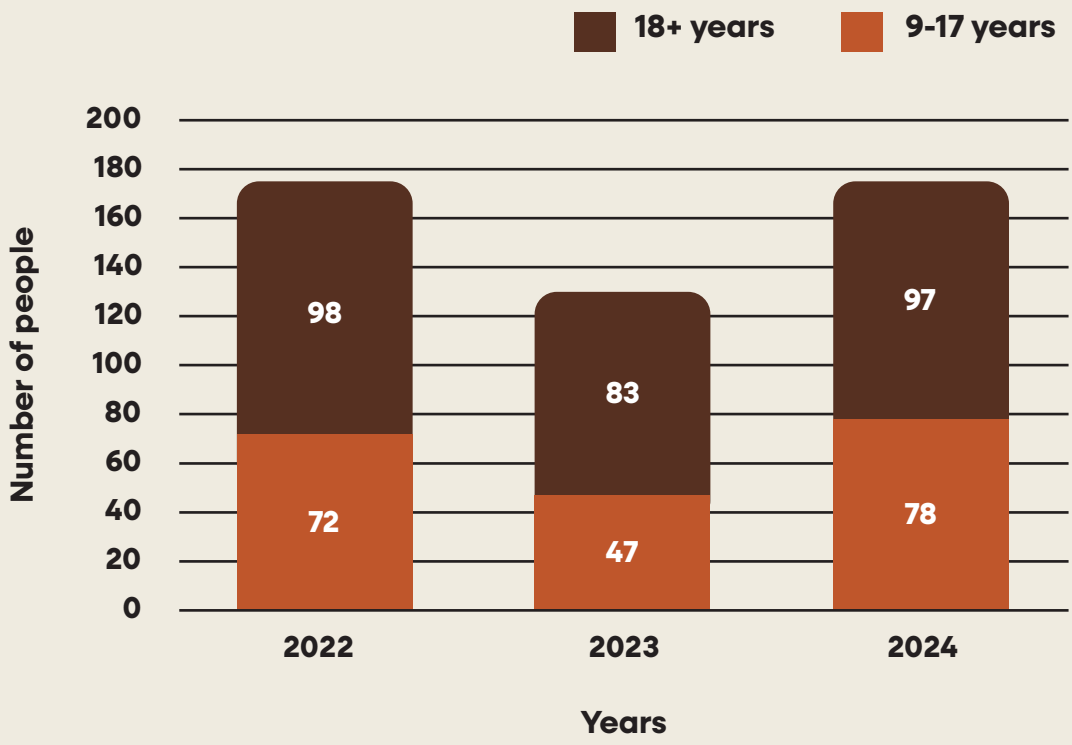
From 2022 to 2024, the most prevalent 'reasons for health engagement' were as follows:

- 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
- Eye health
- Pre-pregnancy sexual health and wellbeing
- Respiratory issues
- COVID-19 planning, testing support, vaccinations
- 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 and illness

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.

Graph 2

Number of family members engaged in health promotion and support, by year



Health promotion and support

From 2022 to 2024, 393 family members engaged with health promotion. Graph 2 shows the breakdown by young and adult family members.

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.

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members reported increased health literacy and access to clinical and other health services, through support from Children's Ground.

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. Some highlighted the value of occasions of transport to collect medication, bush medicine, and support with power card top-ups which are critical to environmental health and wellbeing.

"Yeah, my health has improved. [a family member] is 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

"To make [health clinic] appointment. They help us talk when we can't talk English much."

35-40 years, female,
First Nations community 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 community 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 community member, 2024

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.

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 the health support they engaged with through Children's Ground.

Young women's groups

From 2022 to 2024, 23 young girls/women aged 9-17 years participated in Young Women's Groups alongside 15 female adults (18+ years) with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing, sexual and reproductive health, women's health and safety.

First Nations community-based 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 important places to talk with young women about women's cultural health practices as well as sexual health promotion and positive partner relationships.

"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

Some First Nations community-based staff/family members reported the need to establish Men's/Boys' Groups to support their social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) as well.

Social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) promotion and support

SEWB promotion was integrated into early learning sessions. Children's Ground also employed social/emotional counsellors/practitioners who worked with staff, children, young people and adults. In addition to this, all Children's Ground delivery staff provided informal SEWB support in different ways.

Although informal SEWB support is not provided by trained SEWB practitioners, it is included in the data below because it demonstrates the relational nature of the CG Approach. People often share their concerns with staff they have a strong or longstanding relationship with. When informal SEWB support occurred, if required, people were supported to engage with the SEWB counsellor/practitioner and/or referred to a relevant mental health service.

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).

In evaluation interviews, a First Nations family member reported:

"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

There have been challenges with recruitment and retention of the SEWB counsellor/practitioner role over time and the focus of this role changed during early-stage delivery based on organisational and community priorities.

Therefore, access to individual and family-based counselling was not consistently available.

In evaluation interviews, most people reported not receiving any SEWB support from Children's Ground. This is not surprising given the resource limitations and recruitment challenges. However, interviewees frequently described improvements in confidence, connection, pride, safety and wellbeing, suggesting that SEWB-related impacts were experienced through broader engagement with Children's Ground.

Cultural health and wellbeing

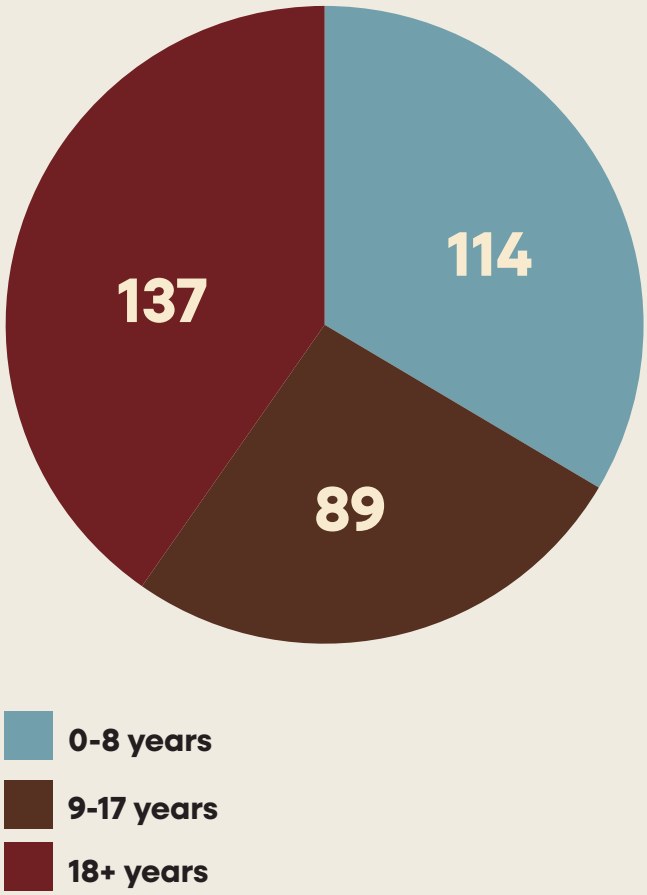
From 2022 to 2024, 340 people of all ages engaged in cultural health and wellbeing practices, as shown in Graph 3.

Engagement in cultural health and wellbeing practices occurred mostly during early years and after-hours learning sessions.

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. This is part of the ongoing cultural strengthening and revitalising occurring within each community.

Graph 3:

Number of people engaged in cultural health and wellbeing practices, by age



Outcome summary

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that Children's Ground is engaging families (young people and adults) in both universal and targeted health promotion, literacy and prevention, as well as health support for responses 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, involves people of all ages within families and households taking part in health promotion together, consistently. This has established health and wellbeing as a priority for all ages, while reinforcing child health literacy and healthy behaviours. 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.

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.

The CG Approach Health & Wellbeing platform, including SEWB area delivery, requires increased resourcing to achieve broader individual and family engagement in health promotion and support.

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

Early years learning and 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 social and enjoyable events and environments. Some were targeted community engagement strategies and others celebrated special days, such as NAIDOC Week and Christmas parties.

Throughout early-stage delivery:

222 family members (18+ years) engaged in learning and health alongside their children, with 318 people of all ages engaged in community events and celebrations.

Engagement in community events included: 104 children (0-8 years); 75 young people (9-17 years); and 139 adults (18+ years).

In evaluation interviews, First Nations staff/family members reported that since Children's Ground started, there have been more 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. Some people noted there had been a similar number of activities before Children's Ground started, but more family engagement since.

Families are actively engaging with their children and the community – but this requires strengthening.

"There was nothing happening [in community], it was dead."

60-65 years, female,
First Nations community 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 family member, 2024

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 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 were not actively and consistently engaging in early learning alongside their children. However, others reported that parents were engaging, although inconsistently.

Parents 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 contributes to engagement.

Some First Nations community-based staff attributed the low parental engagement 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.





Outcome summary

Evaluation 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.

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 diverse language and family groups.

As anticipated, engagement with diverse family and language groups was slow to establish and build in Darwin's highly colonised environment, where populations are mobile. However, reports from First Nations community-based staff and family members highlight Children's Ground as a safe place that has enabled and encouraged engagement. This is an important foundation for strengthening families' confidence and involvement in their children's learning, wellbeing and development.

Community outcomes and aspirations

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Community outcomes

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

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. [14] [15] [16]

Children's Ground has established the foundations of empowerment and self-determination – enabling communities to lead.

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 families) to grow up experiencing equity across key determinants for lifelong wellbeing.

Children's Ground has developed key indicators for change that will be tracked over the 25 years for each community-level outcome. 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 few years of implementing the CG Approach – primarily through progress in Child and Family level outcomes.

14 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.
15 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). (2025). Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention clearinghouse publications.
16 Fogarty, W., Lovell, M., Langenberg, J., & Heron, M.-J. (2018). Deficit discourse and strengths-based approaches. Lowitja Institute.

Community aspirations and context for long-term change and impact

Children's Ground recognises the oppressive and disempowering impact of colonisation on First Nations people, which takes many forms, including the erosion of their right to govern their own affairs. Historical experiences include ongoing environments where non-First Nations people and English language dominate decision making.

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's First Nations leaders have referenced the history of colonisation as impacting First Nations peoples' safety, confidence and sense of worth and inclusion.

Despite this history, Darwin First Nations communities draw strength from the resilience of their people and culture.

The CG Approach seeks to re-establish and strengthen individual and collective authority, roles and relationships within First Nations systems. These are key drivers of empowerment and change.

The CG Approach uses a community's strengths to build a strong foundation for long-term community-level change. Processes and structures are designed to authorise, encourage and support First Nations people to engage in governance and decision-making about their own lives and about solutions to achieve their aspirations.

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 the systems reform that will change the future for the next generation. Figure 5 provides a summary of community visions, aspirations and values collated from each community's Community Plan and presented as a collective.



FIGURE 5:
SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY ASPIRATIONS, VALUES AND PRIORITIES

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.

Alternative explanations for contribution

Understanding alternative explanations for contribution to change and impact is critical to the Contribution Analysis method. [17]

The evaluation found that Children's Ground has contributed to a range of changes, both as a primary deliverer and driver in some areas and as a contributor with partners in other areas.

This evaluation found that Children's Ground was the primary contributor to children's engagement in early learning, after-hours learning, cultural learning and integrated health promotion across the Darwin communities. While one community had some early learning delivered by another provider until mid-2023, Children's Ground became the consistent in-community provider.

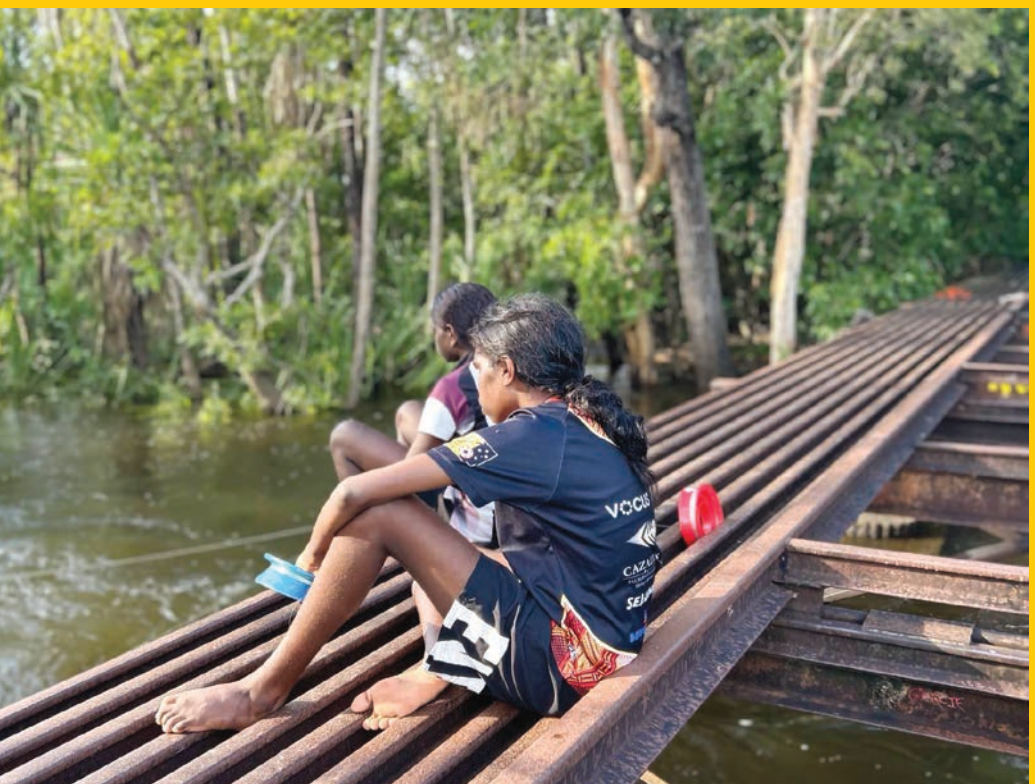
Families contributed to children's cultural and language learning at home, meaning Children's Ground supported and strengthened this important work.

Children's Ground was also the only organisation consistently employing local community members in community, and providing wraparound integrated health and wellbeing services to support people's ongoing engagement in employment.

Local health services continued to play an important role, particularly through clinical outreach, appointments and transport. However, evaluation evidence shows that increased access to clinical health was achieved through Children's Ground's partnerships with these services.

Evaluation interviews with First Nations community-based staff/family members, Children's Ground delivery staff and local services showed that no other organisations were supporting consistent in-community delivery of family-based activities. This indicates that Children's Ground was the most significant contributor to the reported increase in family engagement in community events, and to the reported increase in First Nations people walking alongside their children in learning, wellbeing and development.

17 Mayne, J. (2008). Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect. ILAC Brief 16 p.4



Systems analysis

A causal pathways analysis approach has been applied to examine the mechanisms of change, identifying 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).

Evaluation findings were also analysed against the extent to which Children's Ground's Theory of Change (ToC) for Darwin communities 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.

Children's Ground's full ToC and Darwin ToC can be found in the full evaluation report.

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.



SYSTEMS FINDINGS:

Governance

(community based, bottom up and locally led)

"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

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)

"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. 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.

SYSTEMS FINDINGS:

Integrated services

(holistic, preventative and culturally centred)

"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 Change story

40-45 years, female,
non-First Nations delivery staff member, 2024

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, as well as increase access to and engagement in other local services and programs.

SYSTEMS FINDINGS:

Collective investment

(outcomes-based funding, over the long-term)

"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

Reform in this area has been achieved to a degree, but not to the extent needed or intended to achieve long-term sustainable impact. 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 demonstrates that where adequate investment exists, the enabling conditions operated effectively, with resource limitations constraining scale rather than effectiveness.

SYSTEMS FINDINGS:

Evidence

(First Nations-led research and evaluation)

"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

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 indicates that Children's Ground's five systems reform areas have collectively contributed to early change and impact. Rather than acting as standalone elements, these reform areas operate as an interconnected enabling system. They 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 to intergenerational outcomes. A separate Darwin ToC was developed to reflect the small-scale growth model. Both are shown in the full report.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that the Darwin 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.





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

Local service provider, 2024

“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 provider, 2024

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 a more urban regional centre (Darwin), very remote communities (Kakadu, West Arnhem) and small remote and very remote homelands (north of Alice Springs and Marlkawo, West Arnhem respectively).

This evaluation of the CG Approach in Darwin marks Children's Ground's fourth publicly released evaluation. This evaluation confirms findings across diverse locations that the CG Approach lays the critical foundations required for long-term sustainable change and contributes to short term change and impact for children and families and communities. The evaluation reinforces evidence that the Children's Ground Approach has the potential to achieve transformative 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.

Evaluation evidence demonstrates that 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, increased access and equity and increased engagement of children and families in services. This is occurring in diverse contexts where people have a history of experiencing significant barriers to engagement with mainstream services.

Decades of major inquiries, reviews and frameworks at national and jurisdictional levels have consistently presented evidence and recommendations 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. Yet, the status quo remains.

> "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 change and impact with 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. This is supported by an independent evaluation of the CG Approach which stated[18]:

"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."

"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."

"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."

Both internal and external evaluations have shown how the CG Approach aligns with the Australian Government's key strategies and priorities in relation to Closing the Gap[19], Health Plan priorities[20], Early Years Strategy outcomes[21] and goals[22] and National Justice Reinvestment Program principles[23].

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

18 Allen & Clarke Consulting. 2025. Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, Final Report.
19 National Agreement on Closing the Gap
20 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031
21 Early Years Strategy 2024–2034
22 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy
23 Justice Reinvestment Design principles

Conclusions



First Nations community 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. 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 analysis and conclusion

The early progress findings of the CG Approach in Darwin communities are evidencing modest but significant changes for children and families that are foundational to long term impact.

Children's Ground 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.

Causal links between the systems, processes and outcomes of the CG Approach in Darwin have been evidenced. They demonstrate that Children's Ground's systems reforms are not simply implementation strategies but the conditions for change themselves. However, the findings show that reform in one area of systems, services or practice alone is not enough. As mutually reinforcing causal pathways, the systemic conditions required for change are interconnected and are stimulated by reform in other areas.

Together, the systems 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.

The evaluation of the CG Approach has shown that the limited resources of the growth model constrained the scale of implementation rather than the effectiveness of the model itself. This is consistent with evaluation findings in other regions.

Implementing the CG Approach in Darwin has been an opportunity for Children's Ground to evaluate 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 establishing conditions for long term change. These findings have broad-reaching impact for community contexts nationally. The Australian Government's independent evaluation of the CG Approach in Children's Ground's Central Australian and Darwin regions stated that[24]:

24 Allen & Clarke Consulting. 2025. Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, Final Report.

> **"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."**
>
> **"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."**
>
> **"... 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."**

The Report also noted the limitation of partial funding and the risk to long term impact:

> **"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."**[25]

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."** [26]

Evaluations of the CG Approach to date have demonstrated 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.

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. In an environment where the national policy for Closing the Gap is failing to evidence change in key areas for prevention, the Children's Ground Approach presents an alternative system that evidences both short term impact and long term change conditions.

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 reduced barriers in accessing support. Local empowerment, governance and strengthening of cultural rights and self-determination have been foundational to community-led change.

Medium- and long-term outcomes from the CG Approach will only be realised over the course of the 25-year strategy.

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.

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25 Allen & Clarke Consulting. 2025. Evaluation of the activities and outcomes delivered under the Children's Ground approach, Final Report.
26 Ibid.



APPENDIX 1:

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,

Children's Ground Independent Research Advisory Group

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

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

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

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

Mr Matthew James
Retired. Former Deputy CEO of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Professor Naomi Sunderland
Director, Creative Arts Research Institute, Griffith University

Dr Jordan Cory
BSc, MBBS, GDip Surgical Anatomy, MPH '21 Candidate, Harvard University; 2020 Fulbright Future Scholar

Professor Sven Silburn
Retired. Former Director, Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research

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