

Maximising Impact through Integrated Early Childhood Hubs

**What Good Looks
Like**

Victorian Brief



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Introduction

Integrated early childhood service models are becoming better understood and prioritised by governments in an attempt to support children and families experiencing significant vulnerabilities. They have been identified as a key service model through current early childhood reform processes, including the Productivity Commission, the National Early Years Strategy, the South Australian Royal Commission and the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal NSW.

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is working to ensure children experiencing significant vulnerability in Australia get access to the right supports in order to thrive. As part of this work, we have undertaken extensive research into integrated early childhood hubs and identified the pivotal role they can play in supporting children and families to access key services and connect with other families. This work is focused on building the evidence around how early childhood hubs can be most impactful, strengthening service leadership and capability to provide high-quality integrated services, and advocating for structural reform to ensure that more children and families can access them.

The Victorian Government's significant investment in establishing 50 new Early Learning Centres presents a critical opportunity to ensure more children are able to access high-quality integrated supports. The investment, focus and ambition of the Victorian Government in establishing these centres is a unique opportunity to deliver major outcomes through a high-quality integrated model delivered at scale.



Purpose

This brief provides key insights and recommendations for the establishment and operation of best practice early childhood hubs that provide holistic support for children experiencing disadvantage in their early years. It highlights the importance of targeted early interventions that work to prevent and overcome vulnerabilities, empower families and provide flexible and responsive supports to meet community needs.

Objectives

1

Outline a **comprehensive model for high-quality early childhood hubs**, including essential features, components, and enablers.

2

Provide **evidence-based insights and recommendations** to policy makers and sector leaders on core components and enablers for designing and implementing high-quality early childhood hubs.

3

Identify **key lessons learned** in implementing early childhood hubs to help refine strategies, overcome challenges, and ensure their successful operation.

4

Explore a **best practice case study** of an early childhood hub in action.



Context

There are currently a diverse range of early childhood hubs operating at varying scale and capacity across Australia. There are significant gaps in coverage, and no national oversight or consistent approach to service delivery. Currently, there are six state-funded models, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early learning centres operating nationally. There are also several philanthropically funded models, and numerous community-led centres contributing to the diversity within the early childhood hub landscape.



Core features and components of high-quality early childhood hubs

A high-quality early childhood hub has the capacity to support outcomes at community, individual and service levels, providing crucial support to both children and their families in communities facing high levels of disadvantage. Deloitte Access Economics was commissioned by SVA and the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research

Institute to undertake research to understand the potential of early childhood hubs to meet the needs of children and families experiencing disadvantage. This research identified the core features and components integral to this model. Each of these elements is deemed necessary for an effective, high-quality centre. These are detailed in Figure 1.

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It's not all about programs - parents supporting parents is where the magic happens. They might meet through a parenting group or attending a service at the centre and from that they create a social hub. They help each other with things like moving house, minding children so one can attend a healthcare service. They talk about a service they've used or something they've learnt, which leads to real change and growth. The impact of these social networks is much greater than any program can achieve. This is the gold; this is what creates intergenerational change.

M'Lynda Stubbs, Strategic Projects and Initiatives Project Manager
at the Department of Education, Tasmania

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Core features

Individual & Family Level



- Outreach services connect to families of high need
- Culturally safe policies and practices
- Welcoming environment with simple to understand and easy to navigate services

Service Level



- High quality services with robust quality frameworks and standards.
- Community co-designed, owned and delivered. Services cater to the additional needs of the community.
- Multi-disciplinary approach to care integrates services providers.

Community Level



- Families can connect in safe space even if not utilising services.
- Participatory approaches to service design.
- Ongoing community governance and ownership.
- Effective integration beyond co-location.
- Services adapt and respond to changes in community over time.
- Strong leadership in the community links to services.

Core components

Establishment Process



- ➔ Participatory processes to plan for, design and establish an early childhood hub.
- ➔ Requires sufficient time, development of shared practices, and support for family and community involvement.

Infrastructure



- ➔ Establishment and maintenance of the early childhood hub capital (building and equipment).
- ➔ Accommodates for co-location of services, includes open spaces outside of service spaces, and acts as an accessible entry point.

Glue



- ➔ Leadership and administration required to operationalise the early childhood hub.
- ➔ Requires staff dedicated to integration and coordination rather than service delivery, and includes continued active involvement of families.

Flexible bucket for community designated activities



- ➔ Funding for services outside of core services, as determined by community need.
- ➔ May include mental health services, legal and financial supports.

Core services and supports



- ➔ Early learning programs, Maternal and Child Health services, family support services and allied services as consistent services across all centres

Core Services & Supports

Early childhood hubs consistently deliver early learning programs, Maternal and Child Health services, as well as family and other allied health services across all centres.

1. Early learning programs: these programs support a child's educational development in their early years and may include playgroups, toy libraries, childcare, preschool, transition to school programs and other similar programs.

2. MCH services: the free universal primary health services available to families and carers with new babies, such as health nurses, immunisation services, and breastfeeding support.

3. Family support services: these services support parents to help them achieve the best outcomes for their children. Examples of family support services include parenting programs, mental health and adult education programs.

4. Allied health services: these services support the physical and developmental health of families and children. Examples include physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy.



Key Enablers

In addition to the research undertaken by Deloitte Access Economics, SVA published a discussion paper exploring the operational, policy and funding structures needed to best support outcomes for children and families through early childhood hubs. The discussion paper included interviews with over 20 hub leaders, government policymakers, and sector leaders to identify the complex factors influencing early childhood hubs outcomes. These key enablers are outlined below:



Adequate and sustainable
funding responsive to
community need



National framework to
support consistent high
quality outcomes



Unique response to support
Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander early learning centres



Federal and state
partnerships



Comprehensive allied
health service provision



Centre leadership and
staff are recognised,
valued and empowered



Integration “glue”
component recognised
and funded

Key Lessons for implementing high-quality early childhood hubs

1

Welcoming and family-centred infrastructure designed for provision of multiple services.

2

Valuing and prioritising the glue.

3

Flexible and responsive to community needs.

4

Access and use data meaningfully.

Lesson 1:

Welcoming and family-centred infrastructure designed for provision of multiple services

Early childhood hubs thrive when intentionally designed to be welcoming and safe spaces for children and families to come and build social networks and for the provision of a diverse range of services. A Centre Leader at a Child and Family Learning Centre in Tasmania emphasised the importance of the family partnership model, and creating a warm and welcoming environment:

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“We have very strong relationships with families... the practice framework that we use is the family partnership model, and it's about that relational practice and that relational situation that by making it warm and welcoming, you make it lovely place for people to come to.”

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What it looks like in practice



Open, safe, and inclusive space where parents can comfortably bring their children for unscheduled visits, build social networks and connect with other families.



Child-safe areas for play and exploration, such as playgrounds, communal kitchens and toy libraries.



Sufficient private consultation rooms for diverse services, such as allied health, psychologists, and financial counselling.



A single, shared entrance ensuring a welcoming and accessible point of access for families.



Co-located services on-site, including childcare, preschool, kindergarten, playgroups and MCH.



Located on, or within close proximity to local school to facilitate easy access for families and promote collaboration between Early Childhood Hubs and school staff.



Communal spaces for collaborative staff work.

What it means for children and families:

- Parents more engaged in their children's education, and more aware of their health and development needs.
- Parents have greater trust and connection with centre staff, leading to increased uptake of referrals and a broader range of supports.
- Parents able to socialise, connect with others, and build a strong sense of community ownership in a place that families feel is theirs.
- Children more likely to access ECEC.
- Children engaged in physical opportunities to play, learn and explore.
- Parents and carers feel comfortable and safe attending the centre, resulting in better access and uptake of services.



What it takes:

- Easily accessible space (whether by walking, public transport, or with onsite parking).
- Staff who are trained in relational practice, ensuring an environment that is welcoming, inclusive and non-judgemental.
- Open spaces beyond service areas that provide soft entry points for the community.
- Infrastructure for private consultations as well as group work and communal spaces.
- Warm referrals to on-site or community services.
- Adherence to building and regulation requirements for early learning services, including falls prevention barriers, egress, and space allocation.
- Adequate funding to implement the design features mentioned above.

Lesson 2:

Valuing and prioritising the glue

Early childhood hubs are most impactful when staff are trained, trusted, and adequately resourced to support a child's overall wellbeing, particularly through integrated practice with diverse support professionals. The components that enable integration need to be articulated and prioritised in the design and management of an early childhood hub and require adequate funding, resourcing and staff capability for this way of working.

The glue represents the structures and practices within an early childhood hub that enable effective integration across disciplines and with other services. The glue is essential in creating a safe place in the community where families can go to meet other families and access supports. It includes:

- Dedicated staff to undertake coordination and navigation roles.
- Support for all staff to engage in collaborative, integrated practice. This includes practice frameworks, ongoing professional support and professional supervision.
- Collaborative governance and shared responsibility for outcomes.



What it looks like in practice



Integrated, interdisciplinary, relational, strengths-based, child-centred practice among practitioners.



A multidisciplinary team approach to holistic service delivery, with shared planning, vision and leadership among all members of the hub team.



Collaborative governance mechanisms involving all stakeholders involved in the hub including relevant state government departments, MCH, preschool, local government, childcare, allied health and playgroups.



Responsive, well-trained staff who are better able to identify child and family concerns, provide ongoing support, and make appropriate warm referrals ensuring effective early intervention.



Staff who are responsive to children, building close relationships that broaden the child's exposure to nurturing and reliably available adults and supporting their cognitive, language and literacy skills.



Clear referral pathways and processes to support families to engage with diverse services.



Strong networks with external services with clear referral pathways.



Robust connections with local schools, neighbourhood houses, community groups and other relevant organisations such as ACCHOs (Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations) and other health services.

What it means for children and families:

- Families don't need to re-tell their story and disclose trauma multiple times.
- Children and families receive holistic, early intervention supports that meets their needs.
- Children and families experience a joined-up system that reduces the risk of them falling through the cracks.
- Children and families are connected to early learning and school, enhancing service uptake and supporting smoother transitions.
- Children and families feel welcome and safe in the centre, with additional supports available when needed.
- Parents are able to build networks among parents, supporting peer-to-peer learning and increasing support networks.
- Increased service uptake and support of better transitions.
- Culturally and linguistically diverse families feel welcomed and supported, building children's positive sense of culture and identity.
- Reduced family stress and increased family confidence.
- Families are supported to spend quality time with their children, promoting the development of strong, secure attachments.



What it takes:

- Dedicated staff roles for coordination and navigation to support collaboration, build networks, and support families to engage with external services.
- Dedicated time away from client-facing activities for all staff to engage in collaboration building and professional development.
- Development and implementation of integrated and relational practice frameworks to support staff to adopt child-centred, holistic, integrated practices.
- Collaborative work with all staff contributing to shared vision and outcomes framework.
- Unscheduled time for staff to engage with and support families outside of formal service provision.
- A culturally competent workforce who can work effectively and inclusively with people from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds.
- Streamlined data collection and sharing across all services within the centre to be able to measure impact and improve outcomes.
- Adequate funding for the glue.

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Shannon Newman, the former Director of Research and Evaluation at Our Place, emphasises the critical role of funding the backbone or glue role:

“If you think about collective impact, there’s often the absence of funding at the site level for things to happen. We have the privilege of having funding for the backbone and having funding to support the site work to happen, supported at an outcomes and strategic level by the backbone in partnership with government.”

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Lesson 3:

Flexible and responsive to community needs.

Early childhood hubs are a place-based service model that draws their strength from being connected to a broader network of services and supports within a community. A high-quality early childhood hub understands the needs of its community and the clinicians and services available beyond the centre, enabling it to provide warm referrals to other services and support families to engage with a range of early learning providers and schools.

Centres require flexible funding and practices to respond to the unique needs of children and families. This might be used to facilitate additional staff or services, organise community activities, or provide emergency housing or transportation for families in crisis.

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...if the money allows us the flexibility then that is really valuable for the child and family centres because you can be reactive to what your community needs are.

Emma Beckett, Centre Manager at
Nikinpa Aboriginal Child and Family Centre.

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What it looks like in practice



Centres are a trusted place in the community for families and play a key role in community development.



Centres use their knowledge and local connections to respond effectively to the needs of children and families through warm referrals and outreach supports.



Centre leaders are empowered to be innovative and responsive to family and community need, while ensuring high-quality service delivery.



Centres can meet many of the diverse needs of children and families by brokering additional services or offering relevant activities such as events or workshops.



Families in crisis have access to emergency funding, transportation or other assistance.



What it means for children and families:

- A safe place children and families can go, and have their needs considered and responded to, fostering a sense of ownership, belonging and inclusion.
- Families have a sense of ownership, belonging and inclusion.
- Access to supports and programs, either onsite or through connected networks, that are relevant to their needs.
- A reliable resource for support during crises.
- A source of trusted information on other local services.
- Support with referrals and during the transition into ECEC or school.



What it takes:

- Centre leaders have discretion over a flexible bucket of funding to support innovative and responsive centre vision and high-quality service delivery.
- Dedicated staff at each centre tasked with building networks and supporting families to engage with external services (a navigator).
- A place-based approach to service design and implementation.
- Ensuring centres are not tied to overly proscriptive outcomes measures and are empowered to act with autonomy.

Lesson 4:

Access and Use Data Meaningfully

Early childhood hubs work best when they have access to meaningful data and the necessary support to use it effectively.

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“It involves more than just accessing data; it's about unpacking the story behind it. It makes it more meaningful and helps us to understand why child attendance has increased or decreased, what changes have been implemented, what strategies were successful, and which ones fell short. It's about exploring the 'why' and developing an action plan and roadmap to move forward and use insights gained from the data and those stories to improve outcomes for children and families.”

Cassy Bishop,
Managing Director at the Cairns Early Years Place

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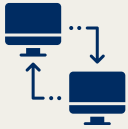
What it looks like in practice



Service providers and governments understand service usage patterns and use this information to address inequality and improve outcomes for children.



Development and use of consistent outcomes frameworks to support quality and identify and measure the impact of early childhood hubs.



Strong data sharing between service providers within a centre to ensure a consistent understanding of family needs and seamless support.



Services gain a better understanding of their impact and adjust service provision, ways of working and operational issues as needed.



What it means for children and families:

- A focus on a broad range of outcomes for children and families, ensuring effective services and supports.
- Staff understand the impact of their work and are able to improve services and supports to ensure better outcomes for children and families.
- Children and families are better supported by staff as a result of staff being able to share data and work more effectively together.
- Children are less likely to fall through the cracks because they are known to the system and better able to be tracked as they move from early childhood to school.

What it takes:

- Evaluation funding for hubs to measure their impact.
- Data collection and analysis capacity either within centres or available to centres.
- Comprehensive data collection that tracks a child's service usage from birth to school, linked to child outcomes data.
- Effective data sharing agreements.



Best Practice Case Study

Cairns Early Years Place

Cairns Early Years Place (EYP) is an integrated community hub supporting up to 120 children and families every week in Far North Queensland. The centre provides more than traditional early childhood services, it embraces a holistic wrap-around approach to support all children to thrive. Daily playgroups cater to all ages, with targeted sessions for children with disabilities and those from multicultural backgrounds. The centre runs parenting support programs, yarn and craft groups, and an on-site kindergarten program. Kinder staff actively engage with playgroups, building relationships and facilitating smooth transitions. Nearly 60% of kinder enrolments stem from these playgroups, serving as a natural introduction to the benefits of early learning.

Cairns EYP is a welcoming community space where families can pop in for a chat, enjoy a cuppa and let their kids play. Acting as a soft entry point, the centre becomes a haven for building relationships and trust, where families feel safe and comfortable discussing their challenges and needs. Staff leverage community connections to identify supports and programs that families can access through a network of effective partnerships.

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The centre provides drop-in clinics for newborns, child immunisations and targeted one-on-one responsive family supports, addressing issues like domestic violence, homelessness, substance misuse, and child development or behaviour. A dedicated team of health professionals, including a nurse, occupational therapist, and speech pathologist, actively engage in screening within playgroups and kinder settings. Collaborations with Queensland Health and a partnership with Wuchopperen Health Service ensure access to health services, foster cultural inclusivity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and ensure a holistic approach to child and family wellbeing.

Strategically located within the grounds of Gordonvale Primary School and Gordonvale State School, Cairns EYP seamlessly connects with the schools, offering kinder transition programs and work experience opportunities for high school students. The centre has two satellite locations and attendance is fuelled by word of mouth, a substantial Facebook presence, and community events. Partnerships with local shopping centres and other outreach initiatives extend the centre's reach to families who might not traditionally seek such services.

The EYP is funded by the Queensland Department of Education and the centre is able to decide how best to use their funding to respond to evolving community needs. Cairns EYP is run by a passionate team dedicated to improving outcomes for the community. Once family's step into the centre, they "become part of our family and they stay".



Jake's Story

Seven-year-old Jake was referred to Cairns EYP when a paediatrician suspected he might be living with a disability. Liz, their mother, who herself has an intellectual disability, welcomed the support. Liz, Jake, and his 3-year-old sister Tina joined the Explorer group at the EYP, designed for children experiencing developmental delays. During the playgroup, staff provided crucial support to parents, and the presence of an occupational therapist and speech therapist allowed for regular observations and assistance.



Staff soon noticed speech delays in Tina, and assisted Liz to get both her children assessed. The diagnoses revealed attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder for both children and additional challenges for Tina, including a speech disorder and other learning disabilities.

Tina was assessed initially in one-on-one sessions at the centre, then in the playgroup and later at kindergarten. This gave her access to the occupational therapy and speech pathology and participation in an early childhood development program for children with disabilities. An additional year at the centre further ensured Tina's readiness for the transition to school.

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Liz, appreciative of the support received, became a volunteer at the EYP. With the centre's assistance, she secured casual employment, eventually transitioning to a permanent part-time role providing administration and playgroup support.

Cassy Bishop, Manager of the EYP highlighted the positive impact on the family. The children received enhanced support at school, and Liz has become stronger emotionally and as a parent through the staff and social supports. The centre's assistance in navigating complex processes, especially regarding Liz's intellectual disability, proved invaluable for the entire family.

Conclusion

New investments in early childhood services present a unique opportunity to ensure that services are designed in a way that ensures the most vulnerable children are able to benefit. Although co-location of services is important for streamlining service access, considering the key lessons for implementing early childhood hubs identified in this brief will ensure that new services are designed, funded and operating in a way that maximises outcomes for vulnerable children and families.



Acknowledgement

Social Ventures Australia Acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country across all nations, and their historical, and continuing connection with the lands, waterways, skies, and all living things. We Acknowledge the infinite connection to culture and pay our respects and honour our Elders past, present and emerging. We honour and commit to building a culturally strong future for our little ones through the work we do, as they are our leaders of tomorrow. We Acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and that this was, and always will be Aboriginal land.

