

In their words: The power of Early Childhood Hubs

Understanding the lived experience of families who
engage with Early Childhood Hubs around Australia

October 2025

sva

THE
AUSTRALIAN
CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
INNOVATION



Acknowledgement of Country



We acknowledge the traditional custodians and owners of the lands in which we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders of all time. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.

We acknowledge the world is changing and that all of the challenges facing our society will be more deeply felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Embedding a cultural lens across all of our work must be a priority in any strategy that is created and implemented.

Recognition of lived and/or living experience

We wish to recognise the people with lived and/or living experiences who came together to share their expertise and knowledge in service of this work and improving family and community wellbeing across Australia.

We thank the families who generously shared their stories and experiences with us.

Your courage, resilience and tenacity despite facing complex systems was a privilege to hear and listen to.

We also recognise the contributions of people with lived and/or living experiences across Australia for many years. To anyone with lived and/or living experience, thank you.

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country.....	02
Recognition of lived and/or living experience.....	03
Contents.....	04
Executive summary.....	05
Section 1: Introduction.....	13
Section 2: Process overview.....	15
Section 3: Impact of hubs.....	23
Section 4: Themes of change.....	32
Section 5: Hub patterns in action.....	78
Section 6: Conclusion and key messages.....	85
Section 7: Appendices.....	89



Executive summary



Early Childhood Hubs lived experience storytelling project

The lived and/or living experience of families facing socio-economic disadvantage and hardship is one often characterised by significant trauma, as well as courage, resilience and a commitment to hope.

This project sought to better understand the experiences of children, families and practitioners engaging with Early Childhood Hubs.

The outcomes seek to help optimise hubs to meet child and family need, and to advocate for better supports for hubs and their expansion into more areas of high need.

What are Early Childhood Hubs?

Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) are service and social hubs where children and families can go to access key services and connect with other families. They usually take the form of a centre that provides a range of child and family services, including early learning programs, maternal and child health and family support programs. ECHs provide access to a range of tiered services to support families with broader challenges they may be facing. They also provide a space where families can come together to socialise and build social networks, a critical component to creating self-sustaining, cohesive communities.

About this project

This project sought to understand the lived and/or living experience of children, families and practitioners who engage with ECHs. It involved three main activities:

1. **Understanding and benchmarking best-practice work**
Learning from groundwork in the Early Years sector conducted by Social Ventures Australia so far.
2. **Generative fieldwork research**
Observing sites and story-building with 17 families and 20 staff at five ECHs across five states throughout Australia.
3. **Synthesis and storytelling**
Articulating the collective impact of ECHs and telling powerful stories from the perspectives of lived and/or living experience.

Findings from this project have been synthesised and summarised into three sections, including the **impact of hubs**, highlighting the unique role and impact of ECHs (see *Section 3*), **themes of change**, detailing five common themes and patterns of the features and functions of ECHs (see *Section 4*), and **hub patterns in action**, documenting the child and family experiences of the five ECHs as journey maps (see *Section 5*).

Key insights

Through generative engagement with 17 families and 20 staff at five ECHs across five states throughout Australia, we heard about the various ways ECHs work with families along a spectrum of crisis support to community development. Despite the variety of services, we observed there is a distinct pattern to the way ECHs engage with families towards achieving outcomes together.

What do families experience at ECHs?

Families experience ECHs as life changing communities and services that support whole of family wellbeing. ECHs were observed to be spaces for play, learning, health, social work and connection for families and communities with diverse needs. They are spaces which interface with complex systems and provide ongoing support from dedicated staff and volunteers. ECHs support families towards family empowerment through five key ‘stepping stones’ for change.

Limitations of the findings

We note the findings presented in this report are synthesised from observations and interviews at five ‘best practice’ ECHs around Australia to highlight what works, and may not be representative of all ECHs. The five ECHs engaged in this research included:

1. **Our Place, Morwell VIC**
2. **Barnardos, Auburn & South Coast NSW**
3. **Lutheran Care Family Zone, Ingle Farm SA**
4. **The Benevolent Society, Coomera Springs & Nerang QLD**
5. **Meerilinga, Beechboro WA**

ECH themes (‘Stepping stones’) of change

1. **Safe & trusting foundations:** Building emotional safety to engage, so families seek help earlier.
2. **Children’s wellbeing & development:** Addressing developmental needs early, so more children are able to thrive.
3. **Parent confidence & capability:** Empowering parents with skills and confidence, so parents are stronger caregivers.
4. **Wrap-around home support:** Increasing independence, financial stability, food security and self-determination, so crisis impacts are reduced.
5. **Ongoing connection & belonging:** Sustaining strong and enduring connections that build community, so communities sustain themselves.



Figure 1. Five Early Childhood Hubs engaged as part of this project

ECHs key themes and characteristics

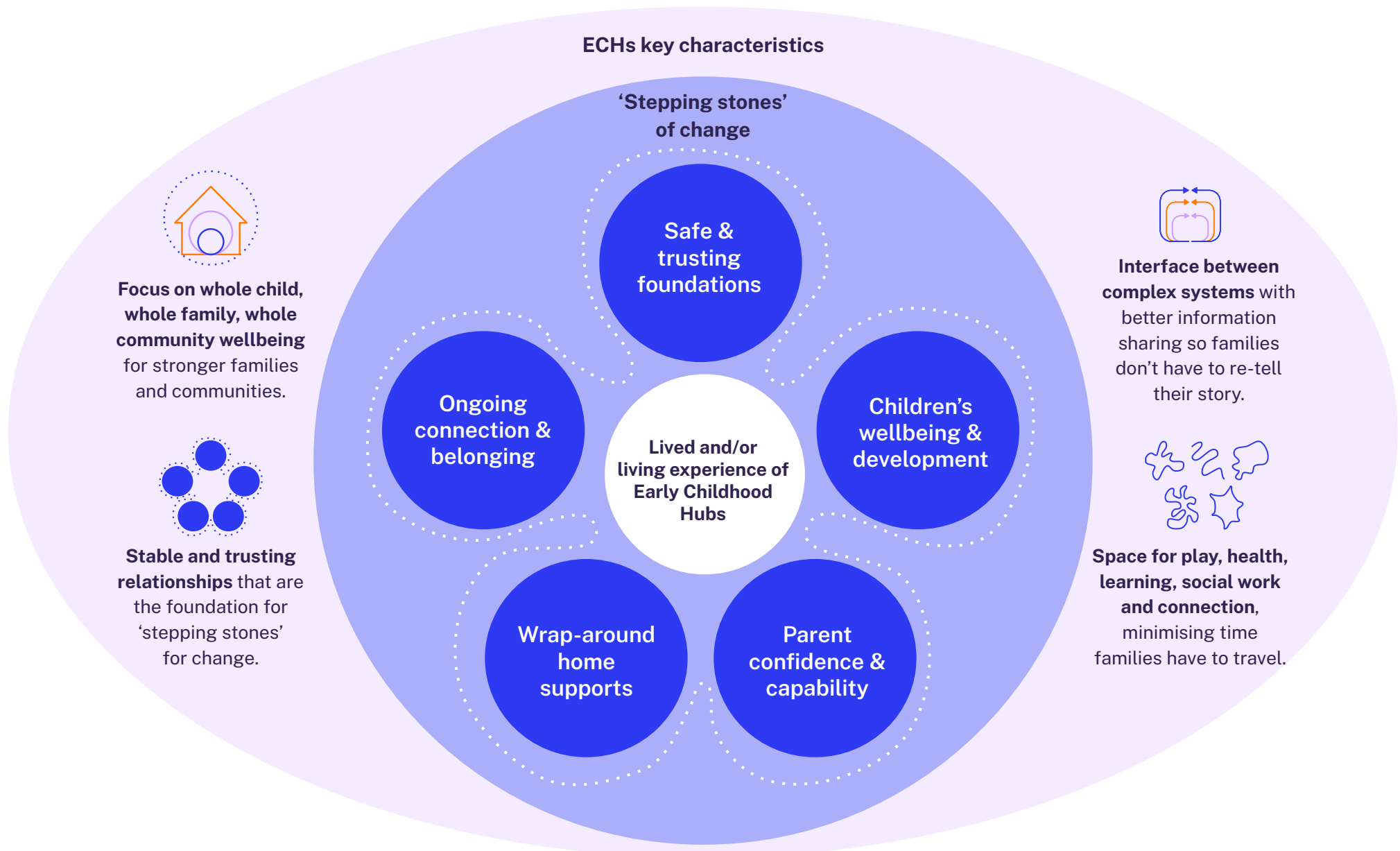


Figure 2. Lived and/or living experience of Early Childhood Hubs, including the 'Stepping stones' for change and key characteristics

Families' experiences of ECHs

Early Childhood Hubs definition¹

Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) provide access to high-quality early education and childhood care (ECEC), developmental checks and child health services, family and parenting supports, allied health and other early intervention supports, as well as providing a space where children and families can come together to build social networks. They overcome many barriers to accessing and participating in ECEC, outreaching to families and building trust, identifying and redressing developmental concerns and supporting families.

Through our lived experience research, we heard the life-changing impact ECHs have for families and communities. Families described their hubs in the following ways:

One-stop-shop

Co-location is very important to the ECH experience. Hubs give families the opportunity to experience multiple services and supports in one location ranging from food relief, parenting programs, legal aid, therapy access, social connection, making it easier for families to get holistic help to navigate multiple systems. This reduces stress and increases follow-through of family engagement with services. The ability to have various check-ins was greatly appreciated, ranging from formal meetings to corridor conversations, both between staff and families, and between staff.

“You don’t have to go looking, they’re just there, and they already know your story.” — Family member

Early and ongoing help

Hubs not only support the primary need of the family, but take into consideration their whole life. Hubs operate on a spectrum from crisis support to community building, which is reflected in the programs and services they house, in combination with place-based responsiveness and feedback to what their community needs. Families appreciate the ongoing, non-judgemental and flexible support during everyday interactions, as well as during moments of intensive support.

“Come when you can, come as you are.” — Family member

“Keeps my family together.” — Family member

Wrap-around support through integrated practice

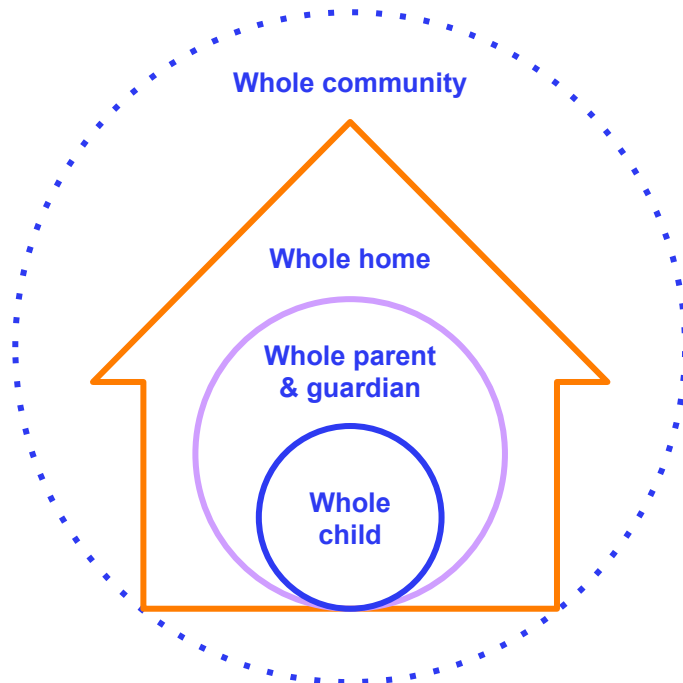
Hubs have the ability to be flexible to meet diverse needs and goals across different families, such as child development for school readiness or programs for parenting confidence, but all hubs take an integrated and multimodal approach to achieving their goal. Working groups and co-facilitation with Education, Child Safety, Aboriginal Health and Playgroups align funding, staffing and programming while ensuring shared language and outcomes that families experience as ‘worry free’ and ‘easy’.

In response to complex family need, hub staff often refer families to other services and also support families to engage with those services. Hub staff will often accompany families to allied health appointments, community groups, statutory meetings and/or court hearings.

“They helped with housing, child behaviour, finance, Centrelink, childcare, bank.” — Family member

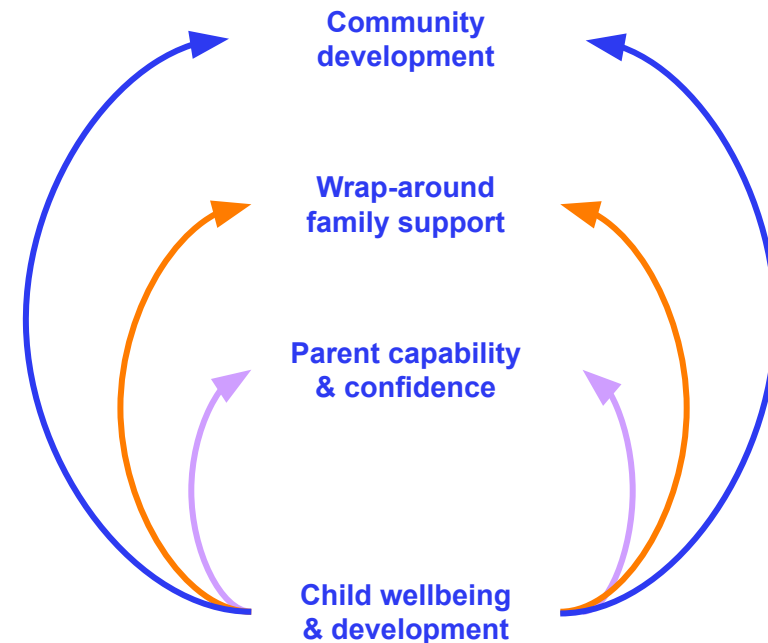
Families' experiences of ECHs

Why are Early Childhood Hubs so important?



Holistic support across intersectional inequalities

ECHs provide wrap-around support for not only the child, but the parent, home and community too. They are an interface between many other complex systems and intersectional inequalities, such as family and domestic violence, food insecurity and homelessness. At hubs, services are brought together under one roof, who can link and advocate across agencies through a village-style network of people, trust and relationships.



Navigator for complex systems

ECHs navigate complexity through a child development and trauma-informed lens. Co-located teams and partners observe, screen and support both children and families. This early intervention stabilises child wellbeing and development, while making more room for parents to grow their capabilities and confidence, strengthen their family supports and build deeper connections in their community.

Practitioners' experiences of ECHs

What helps Early Childhood Hubs work well?

For an operational perspective, we spoke to permanent team members from program delivery, temporary housing, social and case work, intake and enrollment and cultural connector roles, as well as hub partners. From staff, we heard there were multiple ways ECHs have found ways to operate sustainably.

Flexible & ongoing funding

Hubs are incredibly resilient and creative in securing ongoing funding. Block funding in cycles of 3-5 years was noted as the best current model, where service contracts roll-on with minimal processes to re-apply. The most burdensome and insecure funding is 12 month program funding cycles, which increases paperwork, reinforces competitive mindsets and results in staff and program insecurity. Families reported wanting to know that the people and programs they engage with will be around to provide continuity for their children who have already experienced instability and ill-fitting services in the past. With flexible and ongoing funding, hubs provide a sense of security and stability for families, which is a vital enabler towards building, or rebuilding, trust.

Common ways of working

Regardless of how many services families access, it is important for hubs to have consistent policies and procedures across programs. Hubs establish a common set of skills, such as cultural competency training and assisting neurodiverse families with transitions. Many hubs develop common sets of ways of working, including through developing tools such as the Child Information Scheme, Safety Plans and Peep Child Development.

Non-time bound support

It is important that hubs and caseworkers identify the right primary need for families in consideration with their whole life. Most hubs do not have a set duration for families to be involved in programs, and in many cases families can drop-in at any time. This allows for support to be provided whenever and for as long as families need it, with the ability to come back into casework or intensive support if needed.

Relational & safe spaces

Families repeatedly described their hubs as places where they felt comfortable, safe and supported. Unlike other settings where judgement or pressure might be present, hubs create a down-to-earth and approachable environment that relieved stress for carers juggling multiple responsibilities. Staff meet people “on their level,” which is particularly important for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families who may have felt judged or excluded elsewhere. This relational style reduces barriers and creates a welcoming atmosphere.

Impact measurement

Hubs regularly collect family stories, data and lived experience examples to advocate for hub funding and systemic change. Hubs gather and respond to community feedback through surveys, and some hubs are linking positive Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data results directly to the outcomes of their early years parenting programs, reflecting improved school readiness outcomes. Sharing of this data and stories of impact strengthens credibility with funders and policy makers who require frequent reporting against key performance indicators (KPIs).

Practitioners' experiences of ECHs

What helps Early Childhood Hubs work well?

— Continued

Governance and working groups

Hubs who establish and are a part of local early years governance and working groups can coordinate case work and continuity for families between schools, wellbeing teams, service partners and local health networks. The governance or working groups share and distribute best-practise information, establish common ways of working and build consistent approaches across services that result in better school and service transitions.

State-based strategic alliances

One hub was aligned under a state-based strategic alliance which allowed them to better collaborate between departments of education and departments of health. This reinforced joined-up outcomes and provided an authorising and future-focussed environment that results in more successful coordinated and integrated hub functions.

Flexible spaces and booking systems

Hubs are housed in a variety of custom built or retrofitted sites. The success of these spaces within the 'one-stop-shop' relies on flexible and bookable spaces for allied health, service partners and community groups to use and contribute to the hub, such as:

- Communal entrance points and receptions
- Drop-in and bookable spaces
- Multifunctional playrooms
- Tea, coffee & kitchen spaces.

"Collating data is liquid gold."
— Hub staff

"AEDC data in combination with early years, health and school outcomes, together equals impact."
— Hub staff

"Co-facilitation and shared common language."
— Hub staff

"Consult rooms are used rotationally by LCH [Latrobe Community Health] services, Maternal Child Health, 54 Reasons, Paediatrician and GP."
— Hub staff

"[The hub] has transportation funding to bring people to the hub for drop-offs and pickups. Otherwise people don't have a place to go."
— Hub staff

Section 1

Introduction



Introduction

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) has a vision for an Australia where all children, regardless of where they live, or the challenges their family face, have the opportunity to thrive. Over the past few years, SVA has been building the evidence on Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) as an opportunity to see more children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage and their families thriving.

Building on work done to date

SVA and their partners have conducted extensive research into ECH models, their potential, current landscape and unmet needs. This included recently partnering with Deloitte Access Economics and the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University to conduct research which identified 111,000 children and babies (up to six years old) across Australia who are experiencing significant hardship and living in communities with high levels of disadvantage². This research gave a clear understanding of communities that would most benefit from an ECH. However, it did not hear directly from the children or families who experience the benefits or absence of ECHs.

Lived experience storytelling project

SVA sought to hear from the children and families who have experienced these hubs. The goal was to deepen their existing understanding of best practice in ECHs, and to inform advocacy for better supports for hubs and their expansion in areas of high need.

To do this, SVA commissioned The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) to engage and understand the child, family and practitioner experience of ECHs around Australia through a strengths-based storytelling process to learn from best practice.

Lines of enquiry

Through this work, TACSI and SVA sought to broadly better understand:

- What is a good experience when interacting with a hub?
- How have ECHs made family life easier, better and smoother?
- What are the key structural elements that enable ECHs to do good work and are crucial to maintaining fidelity at scale?
- What contributes to positive outcomes for children and families as a result of connection to a hub?
- What key activities or opportunities have ECHs given children and families access to that would otherwise not have been possible?
- What does quality look like in the delivery of services?

By better understanding the lived experience of children, families and practitioners in ECHs, this report seeks to centre the voice of lived experience within ECH policy development and advocacy activities.

Report overview

This report details the process and findings of the project across the following five sections:

[Section 2: Process overview](#)

[Section 3: Impact of hubs](#)

[Section 4: Themes of change](#)

[Section 5: Hub patterns in action](#)

[Section 6: Messages for policy makers and leaders](#)

Section 2

Process overview



Process visual overview

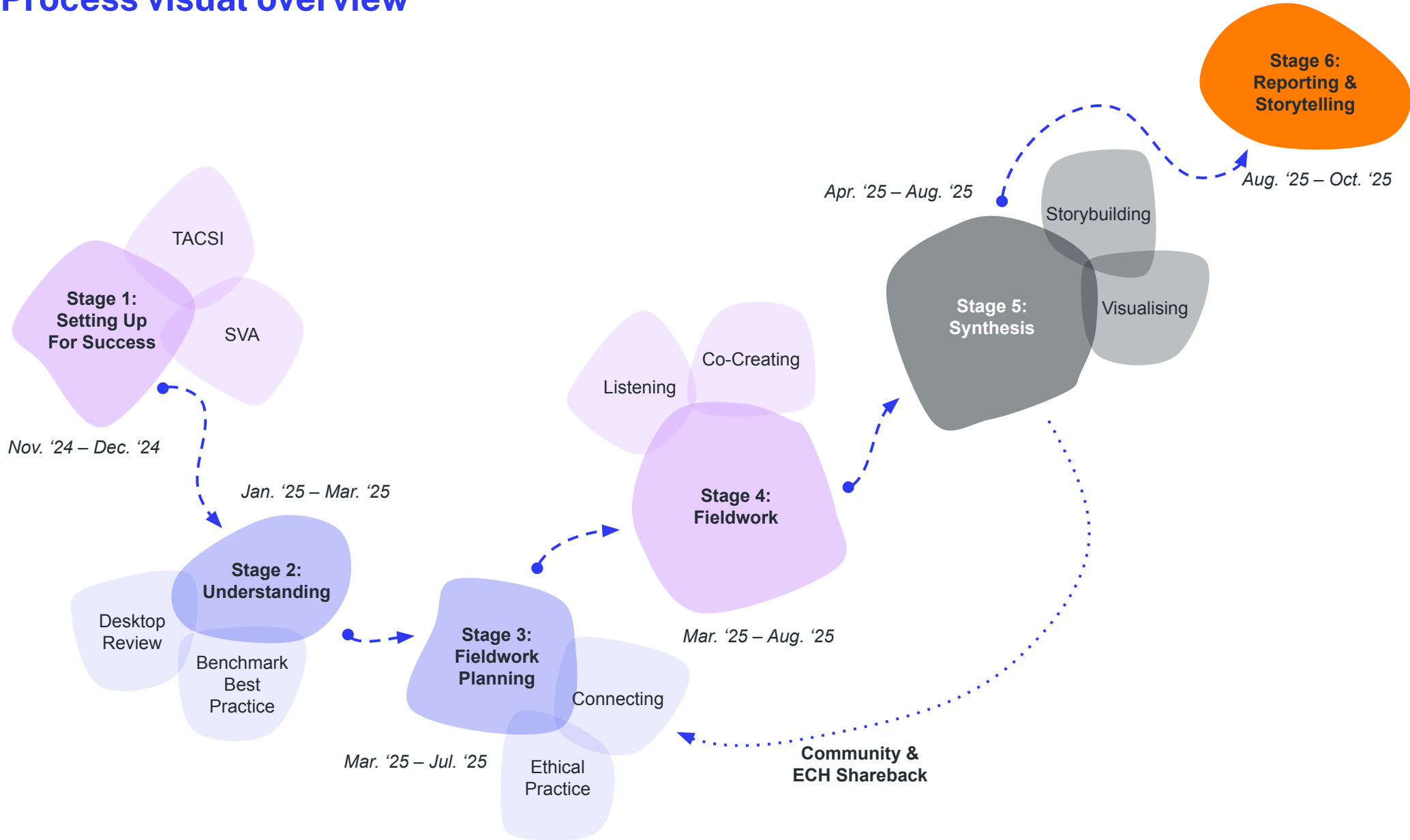


Figure 3. Visual overview of the process and approach taken in this project

Research approach

This Early Childhood Hubs lived experience engagement project was centred around families experiences of Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs). We followed a 'storybuilding' approach that involved listening deeply to family stories and staff experiences of receiving and giving support at ECHs, before creating fictional stories grounded in lived and/or living experience.

The approach was designed to surface insights and build strategic narratives in response to the overarching research questions:

- What has been the experience of families with young children who engage with the existing early childhood service system?
- What has been the outcome for these children and families?
- What has been the experience of staff who provide services within the existing early childhood service system?
- What are the conditions that have supported staff and ECHs to do good work?

The approach followed an adaptive process (outlined in Figure 3) across six key stages:

Stage 1: Setting up for success

Stage 2: Understanding

Stage 3: Fieldwork planning

Stage 4: Fieldwork

Stage 5: Synthesis

Stage 6: Reporting and storytelling

More detail on the activities and outputs of these stages can be found in the following pages.

Stage 1: Setting up for success

TACSI and SVA spent time grounding ourselves in the work and intentionally aligning around roles, ambition, scope, process and communication to ensure that we could adapt to challenges and situations as they emerged.

Stage 2: Understanding

Recognising the importance of building on the good work that has been done before, TACSI conducted a high-level desktop review and review of existing SVA research. This supported a process to benchmark best practices and informed our fieldwork planning.

Stage 3: Fieldwork planning

TACSI & SVA took a relational approach to the fieldwork and recruitment of hubs and families for this work. Guided by a discovery framework, recruitment plan (*see Appendix A*) and internal ethics process we engaged with each hub for an initial introduction, before a follow up conversation to discuss logistics. The methodology for selecting hubs was as follows:

1. **Deloitte Access Economics report²** Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to Early Childhood Centres provided a starting list identifying 210 ECHs.
2. **Shortlist criteria** based on site and service mix, city and regional representation and skewed to ECHs within highest areas of 'need' (*Targeting Investment Where it Counts report¹*).
3. **Initial inquiry** of shortlisted hubs via email.
4. **Final five hubs** opt-in and receive family consent.

¹ Social Ventures Australia, 2025.

² Deloitte Access Economics, 2023.

In the recruitment of families and staff members, TACSI worked from the assumption that the Early Childhood Hubs were best placed to identify and approach families that might be interested and/or at an appropriate point in their journey to participate in this project. An information and consent pack (see *Appendix A*) was shared with the hubs to pass onto those families they identified. TACSI went through this information and consent pack in-person and in-place to ensure that all participants were providing informed consent.

During this stage TACSI also developed multiple generative and narrative based tools (see *Appendix C*) to support families to share their stories and experiences before, during and after ECHs.

Stage 4: Fieldwork

Our fieldwork approach followed a generative design research methodology that seeks to surface both the explicit experiences of community and the deep tacit, latent knowledge held in hubs. This approach was flexible in responding to the unique needs of five communities across five states (VIC, NSW, SA, QLD, WA) that included semi-structured interviews and rapid ethnography. This supported both a deeper understanding of children and families experience, outcomes achieved for families and the professional practice landscape that scaffolds this experience. This approach enabled diverse perspectives and contexts for understanding how ECHs might be adapted at scale, and the conditions that support positive outcomes for children and families.

The practices underpinning this approach include:

- **Participatory principles:** TACSI's deeply social and relational way of working is supported by our participatory principles (see *Appendix B*), which help us to understand and unearth what matters for people, including those who are experiencing

the challenges we seek to solve (people with lived and/or living experiences) and those people who seek to serve and support them (leaders, policy, frontline, practitioners, community).

- **Positive deviance³:** This involves reframing positive deviations from the norm as potential sources of inspiration and solutions. With the support of SVA, we identified several successful examples of best practice within ECHs. By intentionally learning valuable insights from child and families' experiences of these centres to inform effective strategies and advocacy for scale this approach encourages strength-based collaboration, allowing families and staff to share what works.
- **Semi-structured and generative interviews:** This approach enables the creation of a dynamic platform in our conversations with children and families allowing us to explore families' experiences, preferences, and needs when interacting with ECHs. While guided by core lines of enquiry the flexibility in this framework allows for both depth and spontaneity. Our approach to this was further informed by our 'Yarning with a Purpose' method (see *Appendix C*), developed by our Ancestral Aunty in Residence, Aunty Vickey Charles.
- **Rapid ethnography:** Ethnographic approaches in research allow for deep immersion into the context of users, observing their behaviours, and understanding their needs, which enriches the process with valuable insights. By prioritising user perspectives and cultural nuances, research informed by ethnography fosters more inclusive and effective solutions.

- **Generative tools that support storytelling:** TACSI drew on our own experience of narrative practices to help to ensure that families were invited to share in strength-based, trauma-informed, useful and hopeful ways, allowing them to identify the supports and structures that helped them along their journey through various tools (see *Appendix C*).

Family-led storybuilding

Each conversation was led by the family and guided by our broad lines of inquiry. Before the conversations began, TACSI shared a 'Welcome Pack' and 'Information and Consent Form' (see *Appendix A*) to ensure that participants understood the project, context, and how their information would be used. Families could share as much or as little as they felt comfortable, and could end the conversation at any time. Additional support was offered to all participants.

Stage 5: Synthesis

TACSI and SVA met to reflect on high-level insights following each fieldwork visit to the five early childhood hubs. A comprehensive recording process involved:

- **Mapping the features and functions of each hub** such as a spatial diagram, unique features and functions of the hub, functions that achieve integration and hub governance
- **Mapping the stories of families experience** across six journey stages (before, attraction, involvement, support, belonging and future goals) with insights coded as whole children, whole parents/guardians, whole home, hub functions and key quotes.

These insights were synthesised into three key topics of findings (reflected in the structure of this report):

- **Impact of hubs:** Highlighting the patterns of experience across the five hubs and the role of those hubs in supporting families to navigate complex systems (see *Section 3*)
- **Themes of change:** Five common themes with related patterns of the features and functions of hubs that support families (see *Section 4*)
- **Hub patterns in action:** Exploring the direct correlation between the patterns of hub features and functions, and the experience of families at each individual hub (see *Section 5*).

The results of this synthesis were shared back to the hubs and families that participated in this project to give them an opportunity to review and offer any feedback. This is to both ensure the integrity of what has been shared and heard, and to maintain proper ethical processes regarding informed consent.

Stage 6: Reporting and storytelling

TACSI and SVA collaborated to design the structure of the final report. It was reviewed internally at TACSI and SVA respectively, and shared with the hubs for feedback.

A note on informed consent

All participants shared their experiences of ECHs with informed consent. All stories and quotes have been de-identified for privacy. Informed consent means participants have the option to withdraw their consent at any time. All family participants were paid for their time and the value of their stories, in line with TACSI's ethics.

Research focus and limitations

Early Childhood Hubs best practice sample

This project intentionally focused on five **best practise** examples of ECHs from around Australia, those identified as performing strongly on quality and outcomes whilst operating in high areas of need¹, in order to surface the enabling conditions that future investment can scale. Participating sites were identified and recruited (see *Appendix A*) as high-quality exemplars of what works, and our findings assume a baseline of good or best practice based on their operational and outcomes insights we observed.

Sample of family stories and experiences

We would like to acknowledge the strength and **current stability** of the families we interviewed. Together, we explored what life was like before the hub, their first contact and entry into the hub, and future outlooks after experiencing the hub. Many families, like the ones we spoke to, would be considered “hard to reach” prior to engaging with an ECH, yet every story demonstrates how the transition from isolation to connection can lead to better outcomes for families through relational approaches. Equally, the stories demonstrate how networks and connections have been formed through engagement with ECHs, so they are more well-equipped to handle hard times when and if they were to occur again.

Language and framing

This report intentionally does not refer to families as ‘*vulnerable*’ or ‘*hard to reach*’, as we view families through a **strengths-based** and resilience lens despite facing complicated systems and services.

Limitations of the sample

The findings presented in this report are synthesised from observations and interviews with families and practitioners at five ECHs around Australia, and may not be representative of all ECHs. Limitations of the sample in this report included:

Limited sample of high-quality sites: This project applied a ‘*positive deviance*’ approach that sought to learn from five best practice examples of what works for children, families and practitioners. These do not present or represent an understanding of a quantitative analysis or of “less-than-positive” experiences or a comparative study of under-performing settings.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations: We would like to highlight none of the hubs we visited were Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). One site did operate within a community with a high Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander population with many Aboriginal staff and families; however, it was not ACCO-led. We recommend that future research explicitly explore ACCO-led or co-governed hub models to deepen the evidence base on culturally strong, community-controlled approaches.

With thanks

Again, we would like to thank the families, practitioners and partners who generously shared their stories and experiences with the TACSI and SVA teams. Your passion and commitment to bettering lives for all families and children was palpable and an honour to experience.

Hubs we observed in action

The five ECHs we observed each have a unique service mix, or focus, and integrated approach that responds to the needs of their community within the constraints of the funding and organisational remit. Across the five ECHs, there were similarities and some differences that implicitly and explicitly shaped the experience for families.

The following table provides an overview of the ECHs we observed through their differing operational landscapes, including:

- **Overview of ECH** and their unique community context and response.
- **Primary funder** highlighting the sphere of influence of funding partners on the hub experience.
- **Focus of the ECH** providing the key areas hubs are supporting families.
- **Key language** to highlight how the spectrum of crisis support and community development plays out.
- **Goals** highlights the high level outcomes the ECHs are seeking to achieve through their work.

Our Place, Morwell, Victoria	Barnardos Children's Family Centre, Auburn & South Coast, New South Wales
Our Place, Morwell includes two Early Childhood Hubs embedded on purpose-built sites, alongside primary schools and preschools. The Our Place approach is provided on the universal setting of a school and collaboration with the school(s) is integral and fundamental to the approach. Our Place hosts and brings key services needed by families together to provide wrap-around holistic support.	Barnardos is a large-scale, child-first welfare service that provides fee-for-service childcare on a co-located site (in Auburn). They provide dedicated caseworker support and other welfare, therapy, housing, playgroup and referral services to support families in times of crisis and recovery.
Primary funder The Colman Education Foundation; The William Buckland Foundation; a range of other philanthropic partners; and VIC Department of Education.	Primary funder NSW Department of Communities and Justice.
Focus Continuity of learning across educational settings; community engagement; social and informal support; early intervention for health and developmental needs; parent capacity building.	Focus Case work; parent capacity building and education; recovery; parenting programs; welfare (i.e. housing support, etc.); counselling and other forms of therapy.
Key language Families	Key language Client; families
Goals Connection to community; supporting children through education; happy healthy families.	Goals Exit the service when families feel confident and ready to continue their journey.

Hubs we observed in action (*continued*)

Lutheran Care Family Zone, Ingle Farm, South Australia	The Benevolent Society EYP, Nerang & Coomera, Queensland	Meerilinga, Beechboro, Western Australia
Family Zone is a holistic service focused on providing wrap-around support to families to build confidence and community, including outreach to families in their home. They are grounded in community development principles that support them to adapt to community needs. The site is co-located on the grounds of a primary school, with a maternal child health service, which staff collaborate with when appropriate to support families.	The Benevolent Society Early Years Place (EYP) is an early education, play and health focused family support service that is well integrated with Queensland Health through a co-located Maternal Child Health and Midwifery service. They provide ongoing, dedicated caseworker support and other wrap-around services.	Meerilinga is an early childhood focused organisation, operating early years education programs in deep partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, including language revival programs. It is also a registered training provider specialising in a child development lens, supporting neurodiverse children and those with disabilities, and First Nations cultural competency and safety. Student teachers link theory with practise in onsite classrooms.
Primary funder The Salvation Army (<i>through a consortium agreement approach</i>); Commonwealth Department of Social Services.	Primary funder QLD Department of Education and Training.	Primary funder Stronger Communities Programme (<i>Commonwealth</i>); Fee-for-Service.
Focus Community development; supporting neurodiversity (<i>specific playgroups and spaces</i>); outreach and home visits; dad's and men's programs; holistic approaches to wellbeing, education and health with partners.	Focus Maternal child health; playgroups; parent programs; welfare; case work.	Focus Pre-kindy; preschool; First Nations; language revival; disability and neurodiversity; community events; staff training college.
Key language Families; community	Key language Client; families	Key language Families
Goals Increase family (<i>parents and children</i>) agency and confidence; connection to community.	Goals Connection to community; child development; parent capability.	Goals School readiness; staff capability (<i>through teacher training</i>); language revival; connection to community.

Section 3

Impact of hubs



Impact of hubs

This section explores the impact of the five Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) we visited as part of this generative research project. We heard how families experiencing hardship, such as housing, health, education and employment, are too often compounded by systems and services that don't join up. For families experiencing complex challenges, ECHs play a critical role by providing 'stepping stones' of support which start by building trust, safety and confidence to help families take their next steps.

As we synthesised stories and insights from families and practitioners, we saw how ECHs act as a navigator and interface between systems and services by providing 'just-in-time' support to families needing intensive support, while also delivering prevention and advocacy for families within the broader system.

This revealed an important dynamic between both the need for families to be able to access immediate and respectful support, while ensuring hubs have the sustainable conditions to deliver it.

To explore this dual challenge we have organised our findings into the following narrative in response to the following key question (*see right*).

Families and **hubs** are both seeking to thrive within systems and services that don't easily talk to one another.

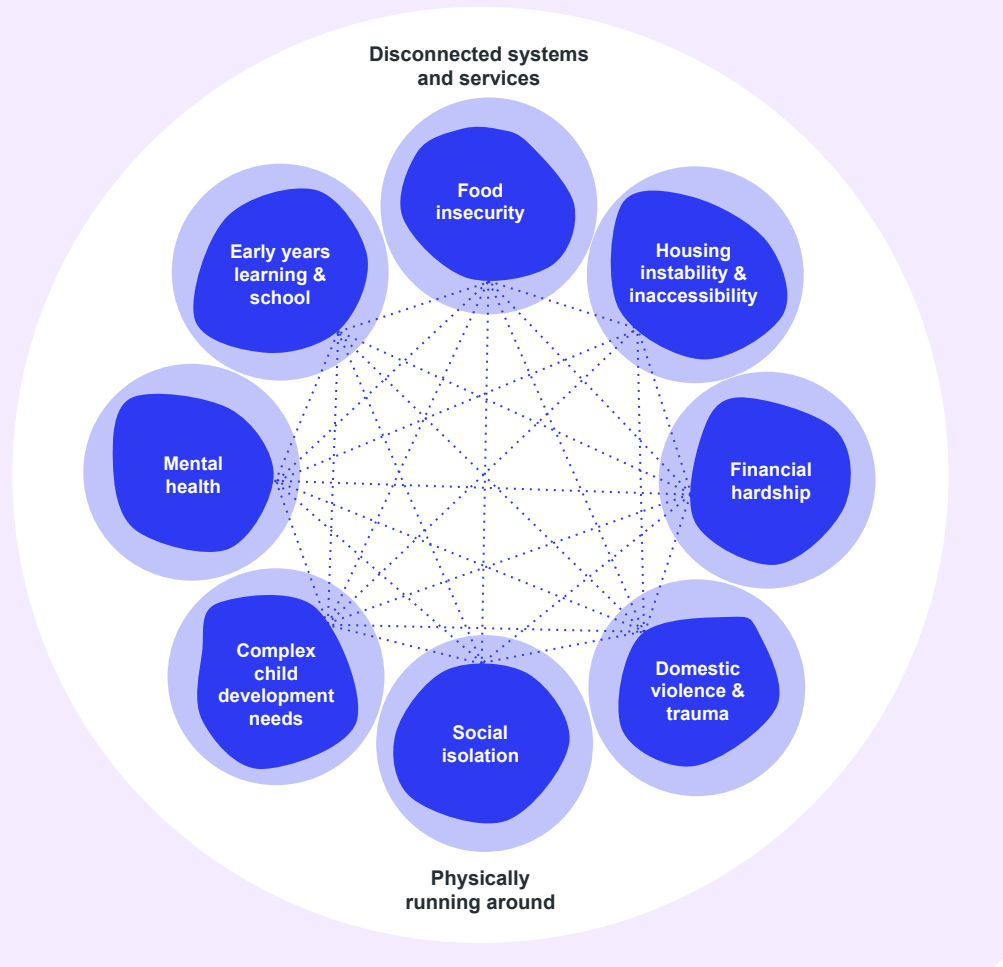
How might families access support when and how they need it, whilst ensuring hubs have the conditions to operate effectively to ensure children and families thrive?

Supporting families to navigate complex systems

Without hubs, families are “busting it” (family interview) to move between services and systems that don’t easily talk to one another. This can mean travelling across a city or town, often under transport and financial hardship.

This requires families to take time and shoulder the mental load of fronting up to systems that aren’t designed to support their engagement, and the emotional toll of having to retell their story.

Families without ECH



Families with ECH

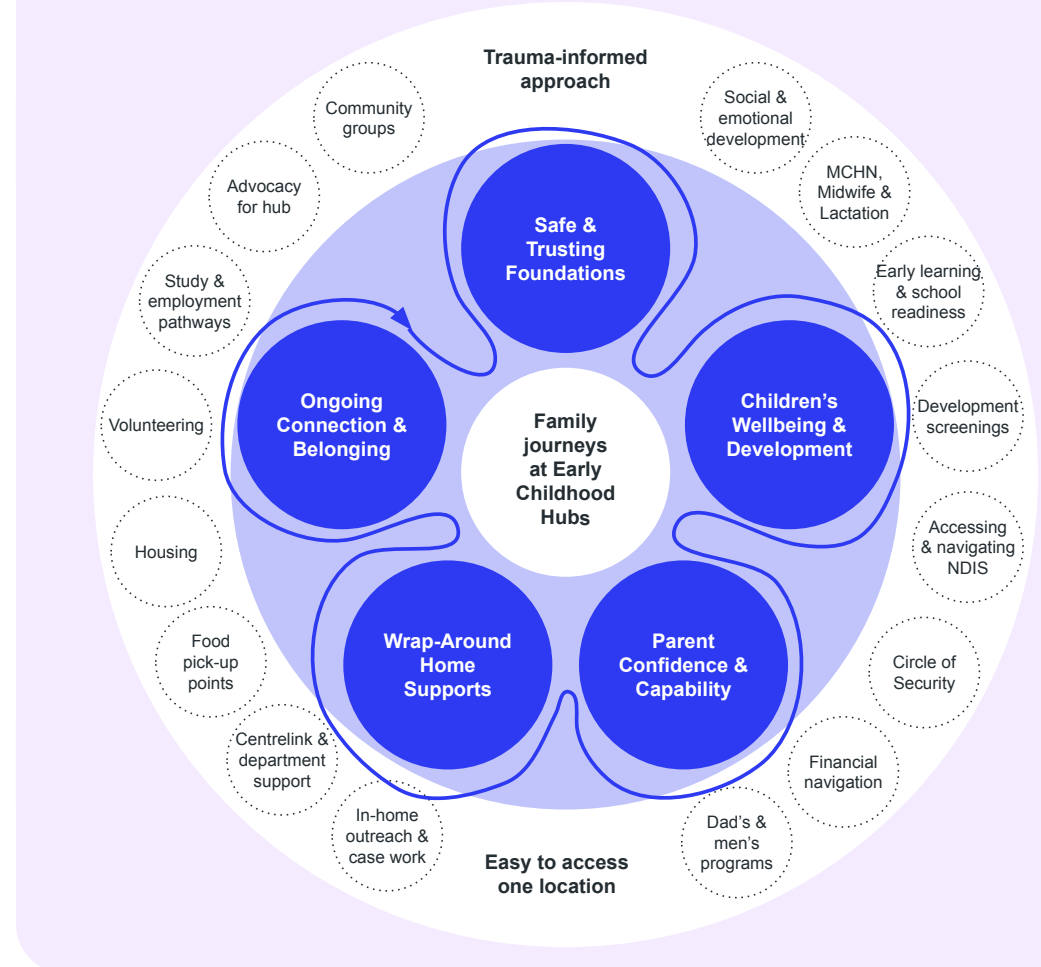


Figure 4. Comparison of families' experiences without and with access to ECHs

Overcoming barriers to access

Past experiences of stigma or system failure can create barriers to entry for families, even when support is available. ECHs act as trusted entry points to accessing support. Families show strength in stepping forward, and hubs show resilience in flexing services around what families actually need.

"It's a big thing for families to walk in."

"Scary time when child safety is in your back pocket."

"The system is not designed for vulnerable people to navigate."

"On the cusp of crisis."

"You're not flagged until you do something wrong, but if you want to help yourself you don't get that support."

Challenges that affected families accessing support

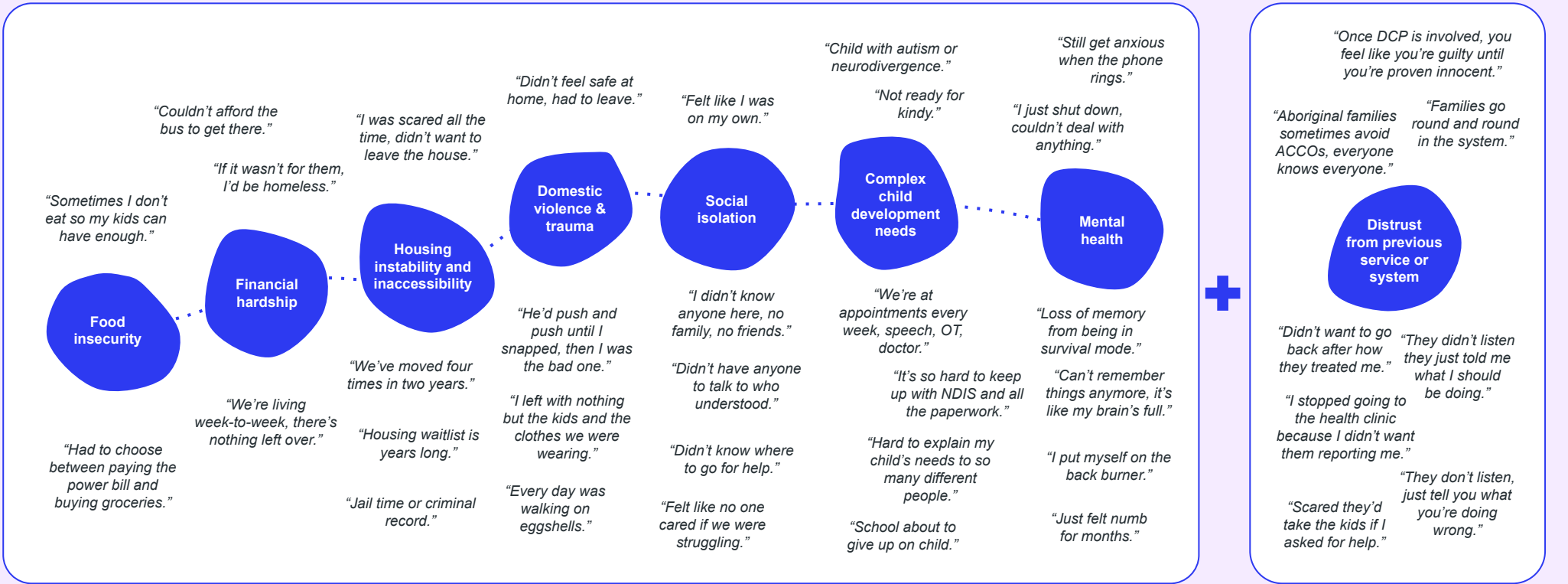


Figure 5. Complexity of intersecting challenges that create barriers to families accessing support

Long-term outcomes from ongoing support

When ECHs demonstrate helpful, integrated support, families gain confidence, connection and belonging. Many go on to advocate for the hub, welcoming new families and encouraging others to join before crisis. This creates a positive cycle where families share their experiences, draw in others, and then want to contribute to the hub and community.

ECHs provide pathways, where families often move from being a participant into volunteering through cooking, fundraising or helping at playgroups. For some, this grows into confidence to explore TAFE training, full-time employment, or paid or volunteer roles within the hub itself. Some, inspired by the respect and care of hub staff, begin to see themselves in community-facing roles like early years education, or youth and social work.

The 'stepping stones' of change that families initially experience turn into ongoing outcomes for strong families and communities.



Ongoing cycle of impact

Families go on to create safe & trusting foundations for new families, and are supported to progress family goals such as volunteering, study or paid employment.

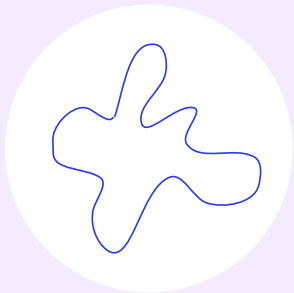


Figure 6. Ongoing outcomes and impact for families who experience the 'stepping stones' of change at ECHs

Responding to diverse needs

Families' needs shift daily, from reassurance about baby sleep to urgent housing or disability support. ECHs deliver a range of place-based, integrated, co-located services that support community need. If the support is beyond the hub, ECHs connect families to partner organisations and assist in transitions and follow-through so families don't have to re-tell their story multiple times.

Hubs are a space for Play



Playgroups set up with themed toys and yarnning mats, **book libraries** with cultural and practical engaging resources, and **playgrounds** that host community lunches and adventure.

Education

Hubs are a space for Learning



Kindy-readiness playgroups, structured routines, excursions to schools, **alignment of curriculums**, parenting courses and capacity-building playgroups, and cultural learning help families transition into parenthood and education with confidence.

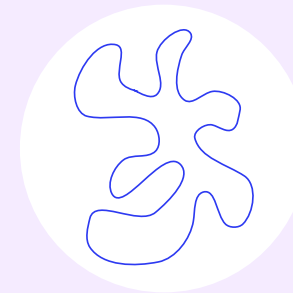
Hubs are a space for Health



Maternal child health nurses for infant and child health checks, as well as **GPs and allied health** for coordinated screenings and appointments all **co-located**, where school children are walked over by staff (*when co-located with a school*).

Health

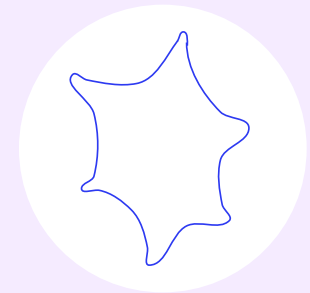
Hubs are a space for Social Work



Caseworkers, family support workers, wrap-around help with housing, courts, Centrelink, statutory bodies, **inclusion funding and food security**, providing stability when life feels overwhelming.

Crisis response & prevention

Hubs are a space for Connection



Cultural and diverse needs playgroups, community lunches and events, **parent peer groups**, volunteers, and daily coffee connect check-ins extend engagement beyond services and create belonging.

Ongoing impact for families and communities

Through the co-location and integration of those services and spaces, ECHs become community anchors with outcomes visible at both the family and community level.

‘Stepping stones’ of change	Safe & trusting foundations “I feel safe and welcome here.”	Children’s wellbeing & development “My children are loved, learning and safe.”	Parent confidence & capability “It’s easy to get help, when and how I need it.”	Wrap-around home support “They walk alongside me and support my whole life.”	Ongoing connection & belonging “We’re more connected, to others and ourselves.”
	Overview Families are welcomed through soft entry points, relational engagement and culturally safe spaces.	Overview Hubs focus on children’s health, education and developmental needs through continuity of care and inclusive support.	Overview Parents are supported with practical needs, programs, and pathways that build skills, confidence and leadership.	Overview Families access coordinated services, crisis navigation, flexible programs, and low or no-cost relief under one roof.	Overview Hubs foster lasting relationships, cultural pride, and community participation through events, volunteering and peer pathways.
	Outcome Families seek help early	Outcome More children are able to thrive	Outcome Parents are stronger caregivers	Outcome Crisis impacts are reduced	Outcome Cohesive communities sustain themselves

ECHs key themes and characteristics

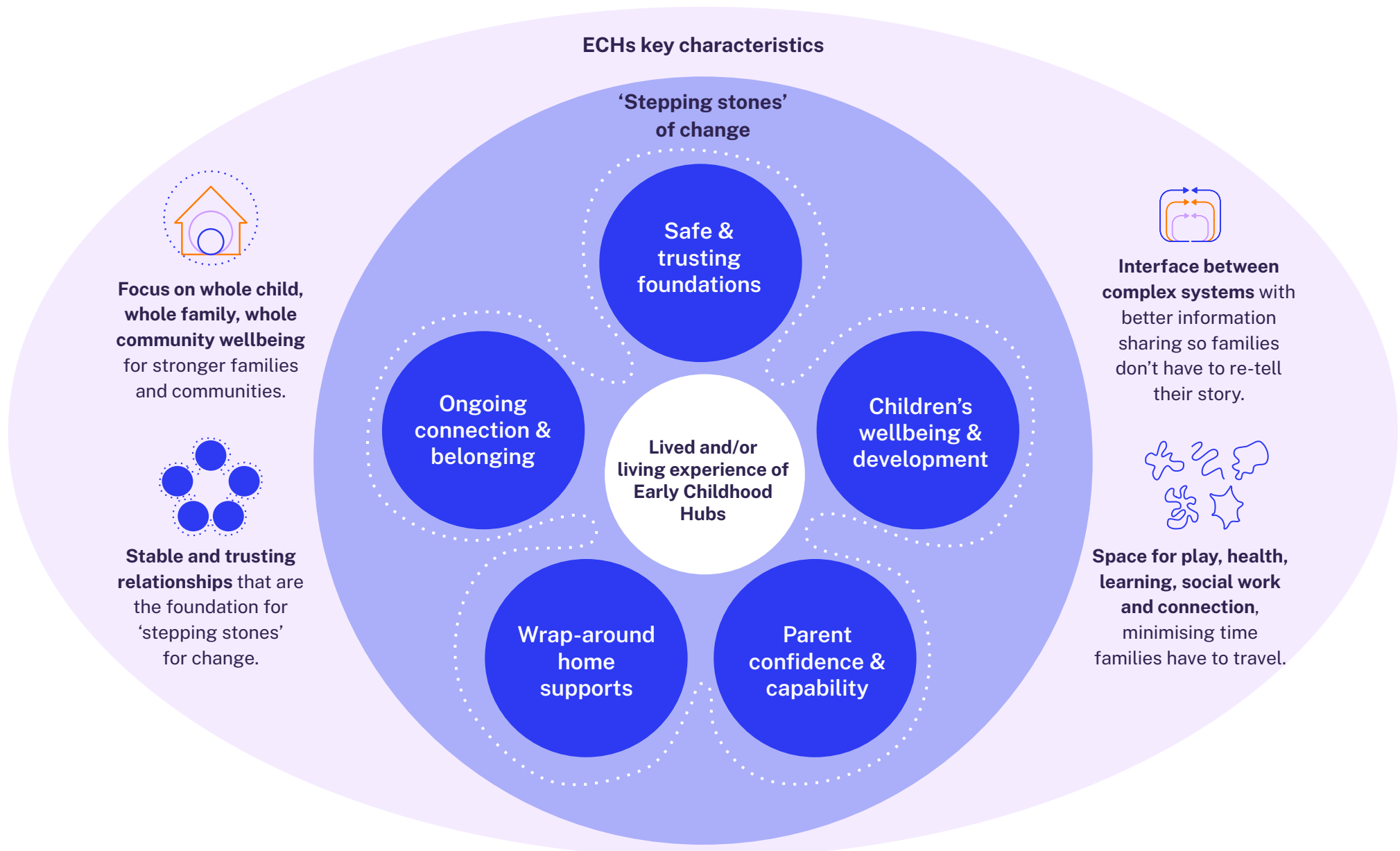


Figure 2. Lived and/or living experience of Early Childhood Hubs, including the 'Stepping stones' for change and key characteristics

ECH conditions for best work

Despite complex systems and systemic inequities, hubs make it work through a variety of creative mediums and methods that result in seamless journeys for families. Still, we heard some key challenges that ECHs face that limit the conditions for them to operate effectively and help children and families thrive.

‘Challenges’ are some of these limiting conditions hubs face, or are at risk of facing. **‘Conditions for best work’** details the conditions that are either currently enabling, or could enable hubs, to ensure families and children thrive. These conditions inform the key messages to policy makers and leaders in Section 6.

ECH CHALLENGES	Short-term and siloed funding cycles that dictate service focus, create instability, and prevent flexibility to respond to community need.	Inconsistent integration of co-located services and capped space availability, limiting what hubs can deliver.	Services not being well-known, and stigma preventing families from engaging until crisis point.	Programs concentrated on only early years (0–5), leave a gap for integrated, strengths-based supports for children 10+.	Hubs aligned to school and preschool timetables closing in holidays and limiting access after school hours.
CONDITIONS FOR BEST WORK	Fully funded in long-term 3+ year cycles across departments. Flexibility of program delivery based on outcomes, not KPI metrics. Programs delivered based on community need, feedback & surveys. Impact measurement grounded in the experience of families. Non-competitive service landscape. Government departments collaborate for more integrated services, funding, commissioning and reporting. Stability, continuity and cultural & relational capability in programs and staff.	Space for a variety of health service integrations, such as allied health or maternal child health. Ensuring both retro-fitted and custom build sites have enough space for integrated services. Integration with health teams is tighter with information sharing and partnerships, including information sharing agreements, common ways of working, etc. Ample provision of parking during peak program schedules and access to public transport. Professional learning network(s) amongst state- and nationally endorsed integrated ECHs.	Awareness by all families. Common part of everyday family life, whether you're in crisis or not. Stigma doesn't exist and efforts to de-stigmatise are enacted. Hubs are endorsed as gold standard. Supporting families early and often before they reach crisis. Backing and funding outreach and community development approaches.	Wrap-around, multimodal services and programs that continue to support children into pre-teen and early teen years. Staffed hub outposts within the community for after-school drop-in activities, snacks and meals. Continuity of strengths-based activities, such as after school clubs and cultural programs. Inclusion of older and younger siblings across whole continuum of support.	Program hubs as year-round infrastructure, not just education extensions. Open door policy that allows community to meet, gather and occupy hub as a safe space all-year round. Hub model reflected in after-school clubs, youth programs, and holiday activities that meet family rhythms. Reliable on-demand supports (food relief, safe spaces, advice) even during school closures.

Section 4

Themes of change



Themes of change

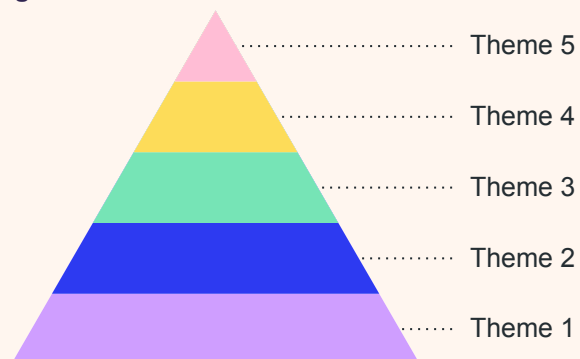
Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) have a unique way to create 'stepping stones' that start by building trust, and create safety to take the next step. Bridging the barrier to entry for families facing hardship starts with emotional safety and security, and is a critical step before the other needs can be addressed.

In this section, we share synthesised findings from across the five hubs. Five 'stepping stones' emerged as key themes of ways ECHs are creating outcomes for families and achieving sustainability for themselves.

The five themes are:

1. Safe & trusting foundations
2. Children's wellbeing & development
3. Parent confidence & capability
4. Wrap-around home support
5. Ongoing connection & belonging

Themes of change



Theme 1: Safe & trusting foundations

- 1.1 Relational ways of engaging
- 1.2 Warm introductions and handovers
- 1.3 Welcoming environments
- 1.4 Community-based, long-term staff
- 1.5 Cultural and community presence

Theme 2: Children's wellbeing & development

- 2.1 Continuity catches
- 2.2 Linking home and hub
- 2.3 Supporting children with disabilities
- 2.4 Continuity and aligning with partners

Theme 3: Parent confidence & capability

- 3.1 Support with life's needs
- 3.2 Connecting and integrating services
- 3.3 Stepping stones to confidence
- 3.4 Dad's programs and men's modelling
- 3.5 Participant to volunteer pathways

Theme 4: Wrap-around home support

- 4.1 Crisis compass and navigation
- 4.2 Flexible program design
- 4.3 Low or no cost fees
- 4.4 On-demand food relief

Theme 5: Ongoing connection & belonging

- 5.1 Accepted and less alone
- 5.2 Multicultural community and belonging
- 5.3 Understanding intersectionality
- 5.4 Becoming a community



Theme 1

Safe & trusting foundations



Theme 3

Safe & trusting foundations



Before all else, early childhood hubs understand that families are often coming with distrust and highly complex life stories. A soft, low barrier to entry makes it easy for families to engage. In-home outreach means showing up where families are at, or soft entry points like playgroups provide activities for families to get involved in and gradually connect with deeper support.

Why this matters

Families consistently describe safety and trust as central to why hubs work for them. Across interviews, this showed up in multiple ways. Families value staff who create a comfortable, non-judgemental environment, making it possible to open up about struggles. Parents and carers feel reassured knowing their children are well looked after, giving them space to focus on other responsibilities. Particularly important for culturally diverse and foster families, hubs offer refuge from judgement experienced from others. Daily updates, direct chats, and face-to-face connections build confidence in services and reduce silent drop-off rates.

For children with histories of family violence or foster care, stability and safe routines are critical. Families trust hubs to help with paperwork, housing, NDIS, and health checks, reducing overwhelming burdens.

Together, these insights show that safety and trust are not abstract ideals, they are felt in daily interactions, practical support and the absence of judgement. This foundation makes it possible for families to lean on hubs as stable, reliable partners in raising their children.

I feel safe, welcome and comfortable here.

Family interview

Soft entry points are so important it means families aren't put off by the formality or pressure of services. They can just walk in, have a cuppa, and start building trust at their own pace.

Hub staff member



Relational ways of engaging

Hubs reach out to families through relational, flexible and no-pressure approaches

This looks like:

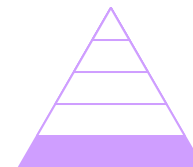
- Flexible, relational, trauma-informed approaches
- Connecting with children, families and community through empathy and trust
- Soft entry through playgroups and drop-in ability to seek or engage in support when needed
- Building a strong presence in community through outreach and hosting events.

“Scary time when child safety is in your back pocket, [Staff Member] was in my corner.”

“Families can have a coffee and re-set before going on. But also they are free not to speak or engage. It’s judgement free.”

“Therapeutic relationship foundations.”

“Come as you are.”



Families are more likely to show up when a relationship has been made. Hubs are going the extra mile to make personal relationships before families come regularly to the hub, such as in-home visits, sending text messages, warm referrals and passive educational programs, playgroups and drop-in clinics. From the front door, families are being greeted by warm, welcoming and friendly staff, ready to meet them where they're at. Through this, the lines are blurred between services and community, and there's a low barrier to entry. When it comes to crisis, the intake process is also relational and teams use narrative therapy approaches that encourage stories to come out.



Example in action

One hub has a Community Connector role dedicated to active outreach with families who aren't yet engaged with an Early Childhood Hub, Maternal & Child Health, kindergarten or playgroup. Their role finds and connects “unconnected” families by being present in community, starting the relationship, bridging access and staying alongside.

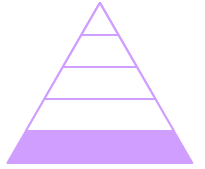


Warm introductions and handovers

Warm handovers and intake pathways that meet families where they're at

This looks like:

- Personal and direct handovers of care between services
- Safe, respectful and supported family-centred intake pathways
- Non-restricted number of home or outreach visits.



“Unlimited home visits and family support.”

“You don’t need to explain everything, they just get it.”

“We walk families across to the school, not just hand them a brochure.”

Families can self-refer, be referred by staff, or through other services, with multiple attempts made (joint visits, phone assessments) to connect, reducing barriers for families who may hesitate to engage. Referrals aren’t just paperwork, they involve personal introductions, shared context, and follow-up. Families feel genuinely supported, not “handed off,” which increases engagement with new services. Where possible, staff go beyond capped models, offering as many visits as needed for families in complex situations, which creates deeper relationships with the family.



Welcoming environments

Homely, non-clinical environments with symbols of welcome that invite families in

This looks like:

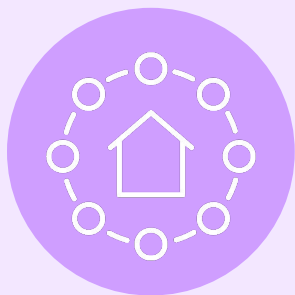
- Meeting families where they are at and supporting them to choose how and when they engage
- Homely, non-clinical environment
- Comfy couch and coffee corner
- Cultural symbols and flags at the door.



“Always welcomed regardless of how long it’s been.”

“Not clinical, no judgement, just comfy couch, coffee.”

Families are welcomed with “come when you can, come as you are,” removing guilt and pressure for parents juggling multiple responsibilities and encouraging ongoing connection. Hubs provide calm, welcoming spaces with couches and coffee instead of clinical aesthetics, helping families feel relaxed, safe and not judged like they might in hospitals or child safety offices. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander flags, LGBTQIA+ flags and flyers in diverse languages are tangible tools that make welcoming culture visible and relatable.



Community-based long-term staff

Long-term team roles that build trust with community and build positive hub culture

This looks like:

- Great team culture that retains long-term staffing
- Staff that live and work as community facilitators
- Community Connector team role that builds trust
- Enabling and supporting staff autonomy.

"Isaac was a student at the [primary school], then a teacher, now at [our hub] as a Community Facilitator. His wife is the Continuity of Learning specialist at the [primary school]."

"It became their home, then they facilitated it [activities and community]."

Trust is paramount as a first step to maintaining relationships with underrepresented families. Many of the hub staff have long-term, consistent presences in their community. This consistent presence over years builds lines of trust and allows staff to understand families' evolving needs. When staff come from the community themselves, they have unique ability and role to create relationships, such as warm referrals while out at the shops in a cultural community. This connection and understanding with community allows hubs to support families through multiple life stages and makes the hub feel more trustworthy, even when statutory services are involved.





Cultural and community presence

Cultural symbols of welcome, community presence and visibility

This looks like:

- Community presence and visibility
- Place-based cultural symbols and animal totems
- Community Connector team role that builds trust.



“We got to take home the magpie mascot and put a story to it.”

“Keep connections going with donations, events and outside-in programs.”

“It’s great for Aboriginal kids.”

Staff intentionally go out into the community (libraries, community hubs, schools, city events) to make the hub visible and familiar. One hub described how visibility at libraries and community hubs meant families already recognised the staff and felt comfortable attending. Cultural symbols, like Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander flags, flyers displayed in different languages, murals with cultural storytelling and intergenerational playgroups bring culture and community to life. Another hub has a custodial animal totem, the magpie, which creates a link for storytelling between the hub and children.

From crisis to community

A mother fleeing family violence, rebuilding safety, identity and independence through an early childhood hub.

Before life was heavy. I was carrying too much on my own. I'd been through violent relationships and I'd already lost kids to the system. Every day felt like walking on eggshells, waiting for something to snap. I didn't want that life, but I didn't know how to make things different.

When I found out I was pregnant again, the fear was overwhelming. I kept thinking,

How do I stop them from taking this baby too?

I had low trust because of everything that had happened with child protection in the past. Every time before, it felt like people were judging me. Like I was guilty, but I couldn't get help until crisis hit.

The turning point was a friendly introduction. My son's daycare manager walked me across to the hub and connected me to a caseworker. That one act changed everything. Since then...

My experience has been open arms.

Instead of being left to battle the system alone, I had someone who stood beside me and helped me navigate it. She explained things clearly, told me it was all voluntary, and most importantly, she listened. Really listened.

The hub felt different, safe, welcoming, and non-judgemental. My daughter relaxed straight away, started talking more. My son, who was usually shut down at school, lit up there. For the first time in a long time, I felt like we weren't under a microscope. We were supported.

My caseworker is a guardian angel.

She walked alongside me through every step, sorting out housing, helping with Centrelink, supporting counselling and art therapy, even arranging grants for the kid's uniforms for school. She helped me untangle systems that had always felt impossible on my own.

I kept my baby. Having someone by my side who knew my story and stood with me gave me the confidence to face a system that had failed me before. Instead of being pulled back into crisis, I was able to stay connected and supported.

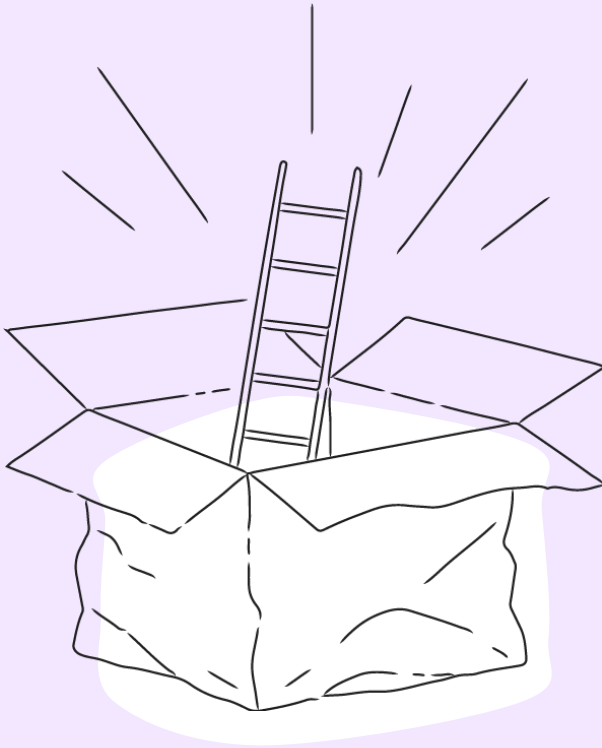
I joined women's groups, built friendships and felt less alone. The hub gave me stepping stones to ask for help before things spiralled.

Together, we kept my family together.



This story is based on lived and/or living experience, but has been altered and anonymised for illustrative purposes. All names have been changed for privacy.

Out of the box



A mum who watched from the sidelines, is now stepping into community.

I struggled to get pregnant for a long time, so my IVF baby is my world. I would do anything to protect her. I even quit my job when we moved so I could be a full-time mum. But without my own mum nearby, it was just me and my bub against the world.

My life revolved around her, always watching and anticipating. My greatest wish was to be able to sit down for a cup of coffee knowing she was safe. We spent our days going to different two- and three-year-old playgroups and dance classes, but I didn't talk to anyone really. I was too busy watching her and making sure she was okay.

The only service I'd used was the maternal child health nurse, and beyond that it felt like I was on my own. Everything was different about Australia so I didn't know what was available.

When I heard about the hub's playgroup, I decided to try. Walking in, I was nervous, but it didn't feel like other places I'd been. It was welcoming, relaxed. There were no strict bookings or start times. Even if we were late, we were still included. They said,

Come and have a chat, you're not alone.

The flexibility of the hub mattered, it gave me the courage to keep showing up, even on the hard days.

Slowly, I started asking small questions during playgroup. Things I wouldn't have gone to a counsellor for, I could bring it up casually over toys or a coffee. Staff and other parents listened without judgement and offered guidance.

It's been good to talk to key people for support who know my story.

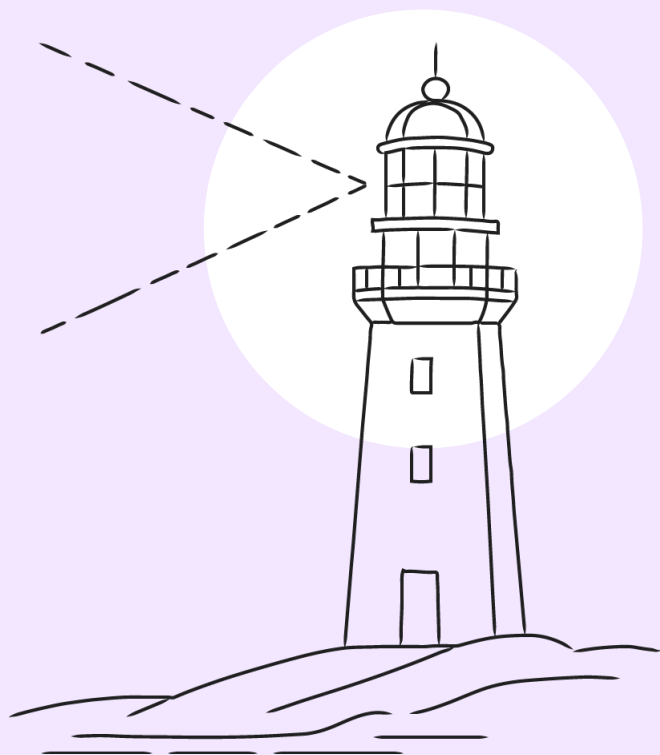
The hub also helped with the practical stuff. When they noticed I looked a bit tired or hadn't had time to cook, there were frozen meals I could take home.

I began to notice changes, not just in me but in my daughter too. Through playgroups, she came out of her shell and was more comfortable being away from me.

I got out of my box.

The hub's playgroup gave me a place where being late was okay, where asking for help was okay, and where I finally felt less alone and more accepted.

Lighthouse through the fog



This story is based on lived and/or living experience, but has been altered and anonymised for illustrative purposes. All names have been changed for privacy.

A father who came for food hampers, found a safe space in Dad's Matter.

Life felt like walking on eggshells. I was a stay-at-home dad for four years, trying to hold things together while dealing with separation, housing stress and raising kids who needed extra support. My youngest is neurodivergent, non-verbal and communicates with an iPad. My eldest also struggles with mental health and anxiety. I love my kids more than anything, but most days I felt like I was fumbling around in the dark.

I felt more comfortable in a waiting room full of strangers than I did in my own home.

I didn't always know where to turn. When the department got involved I felt like I had no control and was just being 'told' what to do like; being present at supervised visits, applying for court orders and being told what my kids needed, but nobody was really listening to us as a family.

I'd be lost without that food hamper each week.

I first came into the hub through Food Bank, just needed to grab some frozen meals when things were tough. From there, I was introduced to a caseworker who knew how to connect without judgement. They weren't above me, they were with me.

Life had gotten pretty messy, but I was just looking to connect with my son and understand him more.

Don't feel like you're above help. It helps you reflect on yourself. Doing good, doing the right thing.

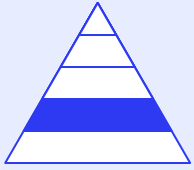
Even though I felt like a bit of failure, they listened and reassured me I was doing ok.

The neuro group helped me feel less alone.

My caseworker introduced me to the neuro-divergent playgroup, which meant my son could play, eat and be around other kids like him.

I did the Dad's Matter course. As men, we don't always see ourselves reflected in these spaces, but here, dads were valued. My caseworker led the session and showed us it was okay to talk, okay to ask for help, not just in parenting, but in standing up for myself and my kids when the system wasn't working.

Bit by bit, the fog started to clear. Instead of fighting crisis after crisis, I had a compass. I still have big challenges, but without those connections, I could've been swallowed by the system.



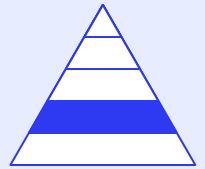
Theme 2

Children's wellbeing & development



Theme 3

Children's wellbeing & development



Hubs provide the developmental opportunities children might otherwise miss. Playgroups, health checks and allied health are co-located, while educators and practitioners are supported to align in their approaches. Parents described how continuity between home, hub and school meant their children were better prepared for transitions between learning environments and provided a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

Why this matters

Families consistently name their children's growth and learning as their biggest motivation for attending. Parents describe how hubs catch developmental needs early, refer on for assessments, and provide practical support with routines, school readiness and after-school clubs. Small things like consistent lunches, shelves for children to practise organisation, or play-based learning build children's independence and wellbeing. Where mainstream centres feel noisy or judgemental, hubs offer spaces where children can belong and thrive.

Parents described the reassurance of knowing that their children are supported to grow in ways they can't manage alone. Importantly, alignment between schools, health and hubs means kids don't fall through gaps, and teachers, educators and health staff are all on the same page.

Together, these insights show that hubs strengthen children's development not just through programs, but through consistent environments, aligned educators, early intervention and inclusion practices for every child.

My children are loved, learning and safe.

Family interview

We don't go to play centres, it's quieter in the neurodivergent playgroup.

Family interview

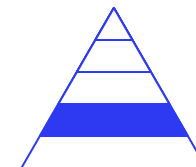


Continuity catches

Passive and planned screenings that catch developmental delays early across the lifespan

This looks like:

- Screening before school and across childhood
- Child development support
- Allied health service screening coordination
- Building a strong presence in community.



“They see what’s really going on underneath.”

“Missed red flags: bad mood, withdrawn, etc.”

“Disability is a big word.”

Families might not know when behaviour is something to explore further, or where to get started if they're seeking assistance in diagnosis. Through the skill of staff and training of volunteers, observations from crèche, playgroups and home visits are shared amongst caseworkers to explore further with families. Staff spot early signs of developmental needs during everyday interactions, leading to timely interventions. Hubs are aligning health, education, and social supports to address learning, behaviour and wellbeing in a coordinated, joined-up way with consensual information sharing.



Example in action

Volunteers at the crèche are trained and enabled to observe potential developmental needs for further assessment in children. Crèche checks in with social worker to align on observations of developmental needs early for referral to a Occupational Therapist (OT) or Speech Pathologist (SP). Child now has OT, SP, Paediatrician, and a calm learning space through hub connections.

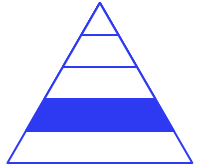


Linking home and hub

Routines, language and learnings that carry over from the hub into home life

This looks like:

- Playgroups and preschool that build school-readiness
- Practical routines to build independence
- Aboriginal language and cultural continuity.

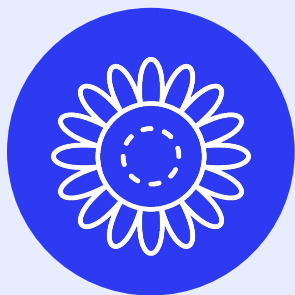


“The same sandwich for lunch routine prevented meltdowns and promoted self-management.”

“Connect at the home with what they do here. See her do things she doesn’t do at home.”

Hubs ensure that what children learn in the playgroups connects directly back into the home and school environment. Families are able to observe their children enacting routines, rituals and language in the home that they were not doing before, and parents feel confident that their children are being supported consistently. Hub educators reinforce children’s learning in both contexts through sharing content topics with parents. Families see the benefit of routines, behaviours and language transferring between the hub and the home, which makes daily life more manageable.

“Speaking [Noongar language] at home.”

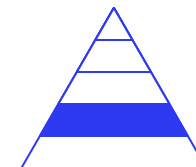


Supporting children with disabilities

Proactive support to minimise barriers to children accessing the additional help they need

This looks like:

- Tailored support with establishing and maintaining routines
- Tailored programs for neurodiverse families
- Supporting governmental service navigation
- Partnerships with Aboriginal Health services.



“We don’t go to play centres, it’s quieter here in the neurodivergent playgroup.”

“Services are too hard for parents to navigate.”

Hubs work with children with additional needs and actively find ways to support parents, such as inclusion funding and additional playgroup or preschool staff. Governance processes are navigated alongside families rather than left to them alone. Hubs host and integrate special playgroups, OT support and NDIS navigation that recognise the needs of neurodivergent children and families, often with multiple children with additional support needs. Staff help parents create routines for stability, easing stress and giving children predictability.



Example in action

At four years old, the family’s son was still non-verbal and didn’t have a birth certificate or healthcare card. Educators helped make sure assessors understood his needs, and supported the family with referrals to NDIS, paediatrics and Better Start Kinder. While waiting six months for NDIS, the hub linked them to a Medicare care plan for 10 free sessions. The family now feels supported and is on the path to an autism diagnosis with Speech Pathologist and OT in place.



Continuity and aligning with partners

Outreach to build continuity and smooth transitions between hub, childcare and school

This looks like:

- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) partnership agreements
- Local governance groups and hub alliances
- Shared case conferencing and transition planning
- Aligned allied health partnerships between hubs, preschools and schools.

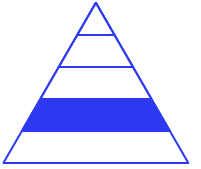
"They will help organise a paediatrician appointment at the school where children are comfortable."

"Staff will walk kids over to the hub for their appointments."

"Childcare has been good, but took some getting used to."

Hubs are creating continuity in child development practices by proactively reaching out to non-affiliated educators in the local area to align their approaches in child development, behaviour, and psychological assessment. This means educators are better able to notice early signs of behavioural delays, understand what they're seeing, and link families to the right supports before issues escalate. This continuity also extends to allied health and co-located partners. It is not always easy to find practitioners who are willing to work in ways that prioritise information-sharing, family partnership and consistent messaging. When educators and health professionals are aligned with the hub's integrated approach, families experience smoother pathways between home, childcare, school, and health services, with less duplication, confusion, or contradiction.

"Kinder teachers aren't seeing it."



Not busting around anymore

A family no longer has to bust it around for their kids' activities and appointments, everything's in one place.

Before, I felt like I was constantly running from one appointment to the next, or at least trying to. We didn't have a car, so getting across town for speech therapy, occupational therapy, or specialist check-ups was almost impossible. Public transport didn't line up, taxis were too expensive, and half the time we just missed the appointment altogether. I was always busting it, and still falling short. It felt like my kids were losing out because the system wasn't built for families like ours.

The hub changed that. Suddenly, everything we needed was in one place. Therapies, school, playgroups, after-school activities, all under the same roof. I didn't have to juggle transport or stress about being late. It was a "one-stop-shop", and for the first time I could actually keep up with what my kids needed.

They approach things with me, not for me.

Being onsite with the school made appointment and school transitions smoother and gave me confidence that my child's needs weren't being overlooked. Staff walked my kids over to their appointments at the hub clinic rooms.

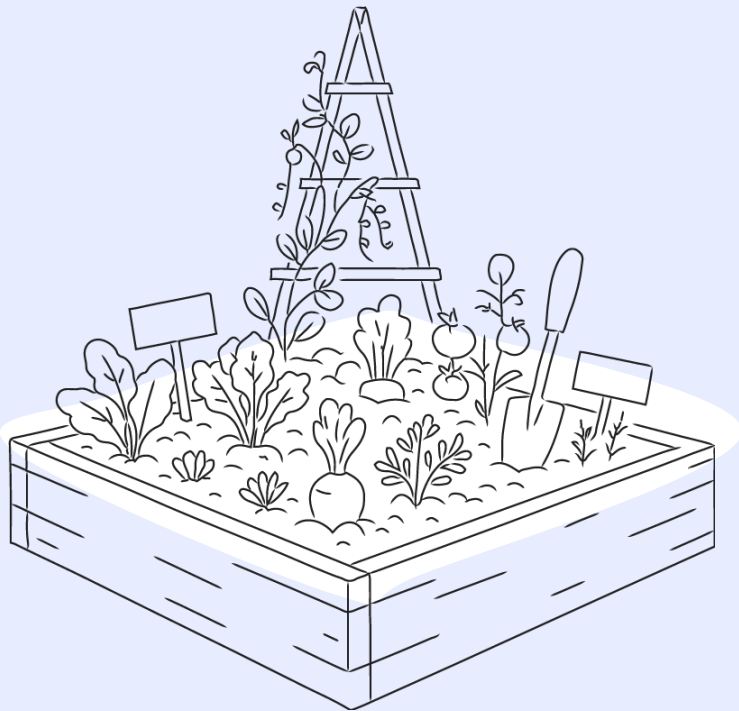
School holiday activities, after-school clubs, activities for different ages, all designed with families in mind, and all free.

Free things are so helpful because if the kids don't like it then it's not a huge waste of time or money for families.

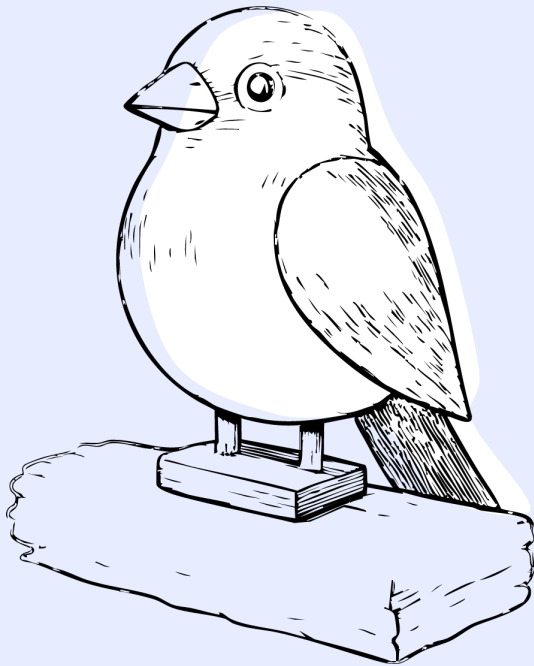
What started as a practical solution became something bigger. Slowly, it turned into a community. Other parents, educators, staff, we all got to know each other. We shared ideas, swapped stories, supported each other when things got hard.

I can say they're my friends. I can bounce ideas off people, not like Google.

Now, I'm not busting it anymore. Without the endless moving around and missed appointments, life is less frantic. My kids are getting the support they need, and I feel like we're part of something, a community that understands, supports, and grows with us.



Connected to Culture



A kinship carer finds belonging and Cultural continuity for her granddaughter at their hub.

Life hasn't been easy. I've experienced racism from both sides, black and white. I've got three grandkids now, I'm a kin-carer, and I'll do what it takes to see them grow strong.

Finding the right environment for my youngest wasn't straightforward. We'd tried other centres before, too strict, too routine. I knew I needed something different, smaller groups, flexibility and a place that recognised our Culture.

When I first heard the hub name, it sounded like us. That matters. Walking in, I saw Aboriginal staff, language on the walls, and I felt this was a place where my granddaughter could belong. Not strict, not judging. Just down to earth. Our level.

My little one came in still on the bottle, not toilet trained, shy and left out at home by her older siblings. At the hub she found her place.

I see her do things she doesn't do at home, like putting things away in her bag.

She even came home speaking words from her great-grandfather's language. Hearing her say them lit me up. That's pride. That's connection. The hub was a grounding place after everything we've been through.

Every day the staff kept me in the loop. Proper updates. What she'd learned, what I could try at home. Slowly, I saw the changes carry through, more independence, more confidence, more joy.

We connect at the home with what they do here.

The hub wasn't just for her. My older ones with ADHD got support too. That paperwork for ADHD and school, forms, funding, assessments, is a lot. There are days I don't even remember my own birth date.

Even food when things were tight. If I needed sandwiches, snacks, or a hand with paperwork, childcare subsidy, they were there. They knew our story, and I didn't have to start again every time.

I feel comfortable, they're supportive and take care of her.

I'll always carry the load for my grandkids, that's what I do. But now I know I'm not carrying it alone. The hub is with us, and it's helping my kids grow strong in their Culture and who they are. It connects us to Culture and community, kids like her, and I can share that with her.



Theme 3

Parent confidence & capability





Alongside children's learning, hubs play a vital role in building confidence for parents and carers. Practical help is important, such as housing or uniforms, to reduce daily stress. Parenting programs, dads' groups, and gentle encouragement to ask for help supports parents to feel capable. Over time, some families move from participants to volunteers, leading activities of their own, and even into paid work at the hub and beyond.

Why this matters

Parents spoke about how hubs help them feel less alone, more confident in their parenting and proud of what they can offer. From emotional support to pathways into work, hubs give families stepping stones towards self-sufficiency and dignity.

Fathers in particular highlighted how men's programs help them reflect on parenting and model new behaviours with their children. By offering low-barrier, repeatable programs, hubs give parents freedom to re-engage as their lives allow, building long-term trust.

By lightening the load, hubs give parents the energy and space to show up for their children. Over time, these small acts of support grow into big shifts: parents describe learning to regulate emotions, advocate for their children and even take on volunteering or business ventures of their own.

Together, these insights show how hubs help transform isolation and stress into capability and contribution, strengthening families from within and creating ripple effects that last well beyond the hub itself.

*It's easy to get help,
when and how I need it.*

Family interview

*I'm in control of my
life now... we are
growing together.*

Family interview

Pattern 3.1



Support with life's needs

Side-by-side help to get through anything

This looks like:

- Casual check-ins and constant connection
- Everyday practical help
- Navigating systems and paperwork together
- Brokerage, grants and as-needs funding.



“Staff followed up when I missed a day.”

“Helped with forms I couldn’t understand.”

“All sorts of little things.”

“Now I’m part of the furniture.”

For families, hubs become the place they can turn to when different needs come up, big or small. Sometimes it’s practical help, like food, uniforms, or a gift card to make it between petrol stations and bills. Sometimes it’s more specific, like staff applying for grants to get ready for school, or reaching out to charities to set-up a new single-parent home. And sometimes it’s just someone who checks in, follows up when you miss a day, or invites you into volunteering or cooking classes so you feel part of things again. Families describe how these layers of support help them cope with stress, rebuild confidence, and feel that they don’t have to “do it all alone.” If hubs can’t do it themselves, they know who to connect with to get the job done.



Example in action

A family was starting at a new school which required iPads, so hub staff reached out to different foundations and charities to apply for grants so the family could access these necessary, but often out-of-reach, resources.

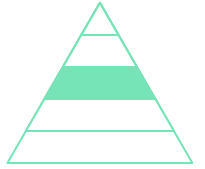


Connecting and integrating services

Co-locating, embedding and connecting families with the right mix of services beyond the front door

This looks like:

- Family consent to information sharing
- Clear boundaries and role clarity
- Partnerships with local and state health services
- Aboriginal health service partnerships.

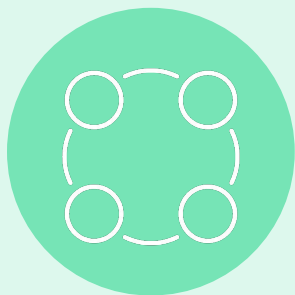


“It’s brilliant to have an instant impact on a family’s life.”

“We don’t like to be a crisis centre. We are parenting support.”

“They helped with housing, child behaviour, finance, Centrelink, childcare, bank.”

Hubs act as a bridge for families, integrating everyday supports like health, play, and parenting into familiar, low-pressure spaces, while also linking directly into crisis or specialist services when needed. This dual focus, prevention and crisis response, means families don’t get lost in the gaps between systems. Families can get advice about child development while attending playgroup, but if housing collapses or family violence escalates, there is a trusted partner onsite or directly connected to step in.

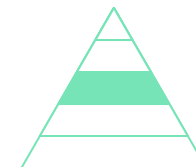


Stepping stones to confidence

Strengths-based language and actions that build long-term confidence to navigate systems

This looks like:

- Strengths-based, reinforcing language
- Parent skills and capability programs
- Sharing observations of parent successes
- Activities and programs to build parent-child connection.



“Trust yourself. Reach out & ask for help.”

“I’m in control of my life now... we are growing together.”

“They build self-independence.”

Families don’t always arrive at hubs ready to engage, many carry experiences of distrust, stigma or fear of services. Hubs bridge this gap by starting where families are most comfortable, in the home or in playgroups that feel safe and non-judgemental. These steps build trust and create space for parents to try new routines, ask for help and begin to see their own strengths. Over time, this scaffolding grows into confidence, parents learn to navigate complex systems, advocate for their children and practice independence in a supportive environment. Hubs are learning spaces for both children and caregivers, giving parents and guardians the chance to experiment with parenting skills, and feel supported as they take the next step.

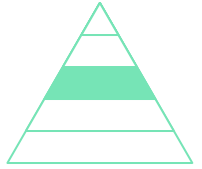


Dad's programs and men's modelling

Male role models and tailored programs that create space to reflect, grow and better connect

This looks like:

- Parenting programs for dads
- Male staff and community connectors
- Cultural adaptation for program content.



"Multicultural men didn't grow up talking."

"Helps you reflect on yourself."

"You need someone on the ground, not just a service."

"I want more dads to know about this place."

Fathers can feel excluded from parenting spaces or uncertain about how to ask for help. Having trusted male role models makes services feel more relatable and provides positive modelling for both fathers and boys. Programs like 'Dads Matter' offer a safe environment where facilitators can connect through humour and everyday stories. Fathers begin to reflect on their parenting and develop strategies for emotional regulation. These experiences not only strengthen bonds, but also challenge cultural norms around masculinity, giving dads new ways to connect with their children and with trusted male caseworkers and community connectors.

"Helped me see I'm doing good, doing the right thing."

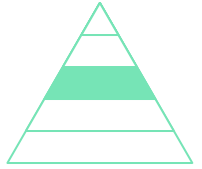


Participant to volunteer pathways

Opportunities for volunteering, giving back, building identity and lived experience leadership

This looks like:

- Volunteering and opportunities to give back
- Self-driven program design and delivery
- Connections to TAFE and training
- CV support and paid employment pathways.



“Helped me build belief in myself.”

“Now I want to help other women like me.”

“Can we be a volunteer like you so we can get to your position?”

“They were participants first, now they’re the ones welcoming others.”

With encouragement and support, families who were once participants become valuable volunteer or paid staff members, and facilitators of self-directed programs. The ability to contribute, earn and be valued reignites families sense of purpose. Some have turned their volunteering experience into a business journey, “I started this cooking class with belief in myself even with limited English”. Many volunteers start as participants, slowly building skills, confidence and networks before stepping into leadership roles. This means families see leaders who have “walked in their shoes,” creating deep trust, cultural relevance, and proof that change is possible.



Example of this

A mother who is first connected into English classes and volunteering in the crèche grows her confidence and staff encouraged her to think about her own goals and supported her to enrol in a TAFE course. The hub’s staff sat with her to prepare a résumé and practise interview skills.

Breaking free of fear

A mother's pathway from isolation to independence, found through volunteering and voice.

When I first came to Australia, it wasn't easy. I left everything behind, my family, my language, my work. Life felt so small. Most days I stayed home with the kids, feeling shy, feeling like I didn't belong.

I lost myself here.

Then one day I met a worker from the hub out in the community. She told me about the hub and the playgroups. That warm invitation made all the difference. I thought, maybe I can try this? Maybe this could be something good for me and my kids?

At the start, I only came to sit in the English classes, my daughter in the crèche. It gave me a reason to get out of the house, to practise, to be around other women who understood what I was going through. The crèche helped with my daughter's separation anxiety, and helped me too, knowing a whole community was looking out for her. The hub said,

Don't be shy, you're doing well.

Little by little, I came out of my shell. From there, I started to help. Just small things, making tea, cooking, sharing food. Volunteering in the English classes. It might sound small, but for me it was huge. That gave me a real stepping stone of confidence.

The staff encouraged me to keep going, to study, to train. I never thought I could, but with their support I enrolled in a Community Support Worker course. Now I can drive, I can go places on my own, and I have the confidence to stand up and help other women understand their rights.

The hub gave me more than classes. It gave me belonging. A place where I wasn't alone anymore. A multicultural community, so many different languages and stories, but all of us together. My children grew up safe in playgroups, and I grew stronger alongside them.

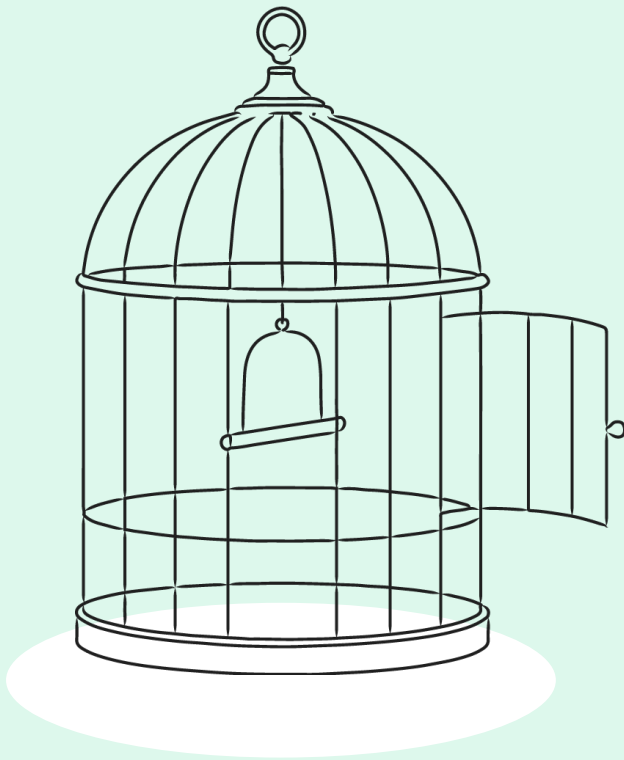
I came here feeling like I belonged to someone else. Now I feel independent. I have friends, I have skills, I have confidence, and I'm proud to give back.

It's so important to feel belonging.

That's what hubs do. They don't just teach English or run playgroups. They give us a pathway, from isolation to independence, from participant to volunteer, from alone to accepted.



Bird in a cage



A mother frees herself from her cage and rebuilds her worth with the help of her hub.

There was a time I couldn't leave the house. My body felt heavy, my mind darker still. I had no confidence, no friends I could trust, and nowhere that felt safe.

No self-love. Why am I even alive?

My life was shaped by cultural rules and control. Married too young. As a woman, no value. My husband refused to let me become a permanent resident or citizen, terrified I would leave if I had independence. I was trapped, isolated and constantly under watch. No education, no freedom, no choices. Only my son, he was the reason I kept going.

I want to raise my kids to be independent. I'm completing my dream in my kids.

When the crisis hit, staff from the hub came to me. They came to the hospital, then my home, then they ordered taxis for me to come to the hub. Those supports were like stepping stones out of darkness.

They showed me I wasn't invisible. From that point, I was met with warmth, not judgement. A caseworker who felt like family, a counsellor who gave me space to speak.

Slowly, through counselling, English lessons, art therapy, the Learn to Live Again program and positive reinforcement, I began to rebuild again.

It's not your fault.

Those words were powerful. They cut through the years of blame and silence. Slowly, I began to believe I was worth something. I started to go to appointments, to the movies, even volunteer at school. I learned I could feel joy again.

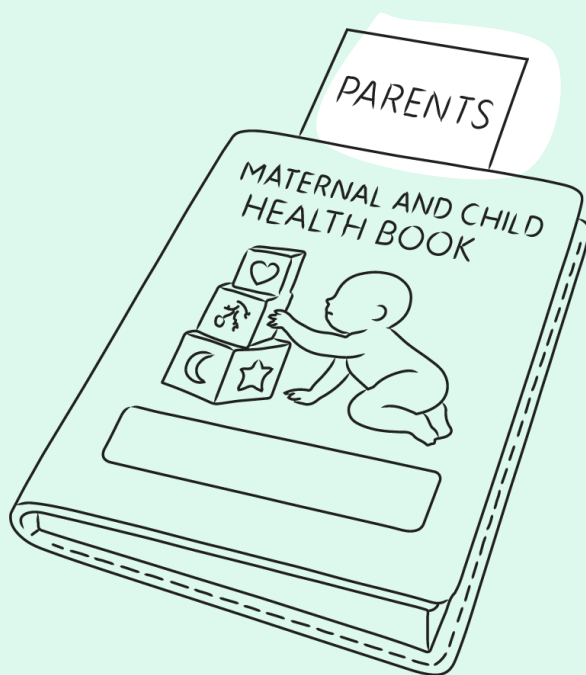
I am not just a woman, I am human.

There were still barriers, no access to social housing, my husband selling our second car after I tried to get my licence, the sting of gossip in my own community. But with the hub I wasn't alone.

When my son goes to school, I will get a job.

They see the whole picture. They don't reduce me to just one label, immigrant, mother, survivor. They see how it all fits together. My children are growing, and I want them to be independent, to be free of the cage I knew.

Little book for parents



A mother's journey from scrutiny, to safety and support.

I was in the hospital with my youngest. I was doing everything I could, but she was dangerously underweight. My husband was away in Brisbane for work, and my daughter was staying with extended family. It didn't matter how much I tried, it felt like I was failing. That's when child protection got involved.

Being flagged by them is terrifying. You're guilty until proven innocent. And I felt that! Every move was under a microscope.

How do I navigate this with two kids?

I was connected at the hospital to a caseworker. At first I braced myself for more judgement. But it wasn't like that. My caseworker from the hub came into my home, sat with me, and saw what I was trying. She met me where I was at. Unlike the clinical professionals who only focussed on weight, she looked at my whole family and reminded me,

You're doing the right things. We've got evidence you're doing everything right.

And she carried that evidence into the child protection meetings. For the first time, someone was showing what I was doing right, not just what was going wrong. That changed everything.

The hub's wraparound support was vital. Infant massage, frozen meals, after-school clubs, uniforms for my older kids, and help navigating the NDIS and OT appointments. All of it eased the daily load.

Less pressure from Child Safety when evidence was provided by the hub.

Staff even advocated with my GP and with Child Safety itself, helping shift the balance of power so I didn't feel so small in the room.

They always care, they always remember. No judgement. Not clinical. Comfy couch, coffee, never rushed or crazy. Loved & safe.

Most importantly, I learnt to trust myself. Where I once leaned on my caseworker for everything, now I have many people around me. They helped me build my own supports.

I'm in control of my life now. We are growing together.

I only wish there was more for parents. The personal child health record book is all about children, immunisations and measurements, but nothing about places like this for parents. This hub gave me the strength to believe in myself as a parent again.



Theme 4

Wrap-around home support



Theme 4

Wrap-around home support



Hubs recognise that families cannot focus on learning and development if immediate needs of the broader home go unmet. Staff and volunteers provide food hampers, frozen meals, dignity packs and help with fees, while caseworkers act as navigators across housing, Centrelink, schools and NDIS. Co-location with health, schools and early intervention family support services reduces duplication, so families receive timely support when they need it before full crisis hits.

Why this matters

Parents described the relief of having one place to go when everything feels overwhelming. Crisis supports keep families connected rather than withdrawing and flexible, family-centred programs adapt around their needs. For many, this practical safety net is what makes it possible to keep children engaged and supported. Hubs also play a key role in bridging trust with statutory services, showing families they are not alone in navigating complex systems. These wrap-around supports are not extras, they are the real success of hubs that make stability possible for families to keep taking steps.

These supports are not only about emergencies. They address the everyday struggles that can build up over time: paperwork, housing loss, food insecurity or navigating NDIS or Centrelink. Families say that when these stressors are eased, they can focus on their children's wellbeing and learning instead of being stuck in survival mode.

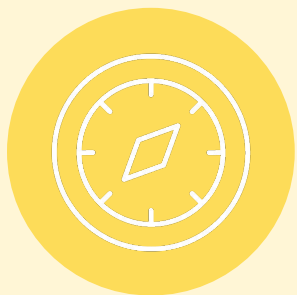
Staff act as navigators across fragmented systems, making sure families don't get lost in the complexity of referrals, paperwork and waiting lists.

“They walk alongside me and support my whole life.”

Family interview

“The biggest strengths are all the services offered, and how staff act as cheerleaders and supporters, if they can't do it they'll give a warm referral... they don't leave you hanging.”

Family interview

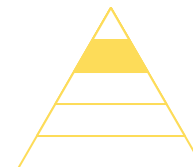


Crisis compass and navigation

Intimate knowledge of, and trusted guidance through overwhelming and disconnected systems

This looks like:

- Integrated case management
- Temporary and permanent housing support
- Unlimited home outreach and caseworker support
- Relationships with child protection and housing government departments.



"Support doing practical things in the community."

"You don't have to go looking, they're just there, and they already know your story."

"We talk to the school and the health service all the time. If a teacher notices something, they'll pop over."

Families facing multiple, intersecting pressures such as housing insecurity, disability supports, school readiness, Centrelink or child protection, often describe the service system as "too much to handle". Hubs act as a compass, breaking down barriers, walking alongside families and helping them make sense of disconnected systems. Staff provide clear explanations, follow-up and warm handovers so families don't have to repeat their story. Co-location of health, education and welfare services further reduces stress, while trusted department relationships mean hubs can stabilise families at crisis point in more efficient and timely ways. When crisis accommodation is co-located with childcare, case work and counselling, consistent support provides a practical map that makes life more navigable.

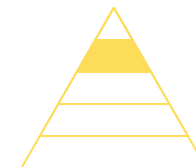


Flexible program design

Adapting programs around family needs, and including families in their design and delivery

This looks like:

- Programs responsive for family needs through feedback
- Timetabling programs around drop-off and pick-up times
- School holiday programs that fill the free activities gap
- Facilitating families who lead their own programs.



“Make friends, learn from one another.”

“Helps you reflect on yourself.”

“Families use what they need, in the way they need it.”

“Not about attendance, it’s about relationship.”

Hubs deliberately shape programs to fit with families’ lives rather than expecting families to fit into rigid structures. Parents and carers are invited to shape how programs run, what content is covered and when sessions are held, ensuring delivery reflects the rhythms and realities for a family's daily and weekly life. Families can step in and out as needed, so they can still build confidence, skills and connection even when life gets chaotic. Programs span across ages and contexts, from toddler playgroups to school holiday programs that fill the “7–12 gap”, to repeatable evidence-based parenting courses like Circle of Security that can be adapted for fathers too.



Example in action

For many families, the road to citizenship is long and expensive, with some trying up to 4-5 times. One hub recognised the toll this was taking and created two dedicated English and Citizenship Classes where families could learn, practise, discuss and encourage one another. Staff took the test and showed they got questions wrong too. When parents passed, the whole hub celebrated.

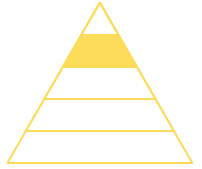


Low or no cost fees

Removed financial barriers
so all families have the same
access to opportunities

This looks like:

- Childcare sponsorships and gap fee relief
- Free playgroups for all
- Brokerage funding and small grants
- Wraparound dignity and daily needs vouchers.



*"We send letters to families
who can be sponsored for
inclusion funding."*

*"Parents don't tell you they
can't afford [childcare] fees.
Sometimes \$1 short."*

Hubs recognise that even small costs can tip families into withdrawal from services. Practical systems like no-cost programs, inclusion grants, brokerage funds, childcare gap fee relief and flexible payment arrangements keep families engaged even when they're "\$1 short". Alongside this, free and accessible entry points like playgroups or classes give families an easy way in and a reason to come back. Long-term funding agreements mean hubs can address affordability, prevent exclusion, reduce stigma, ensure children continue to benefit from early learning and connection, and families can focus on parenting rather than survival.



Example in action

One hub described how the free Monday Playgroup is a crucial entry point. Families who might not be able to afford childcare could still participate, connect with others, and slowly build confidence to move into programs like kindy readiness.

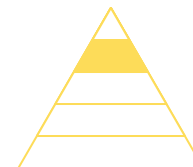


On-demand food relief

On-demand food pantries and weekly hamper drops that act as gateways to connection

This looks like:

- Partnerships with food hubs, such as Foodbank, OzHarvest, Bakers Delight or supermarkets
- Training kitchens and cooking classes
- Donated bread and snacks at Kindy or after school programs
- Overnight emergency relief bags and frozen meals.



"I'd be lost without that food hamper each week."

"Everything that comes out of this [Food Bank] is totally free."

"Food Bank is wonderful, but really it's about the connection."

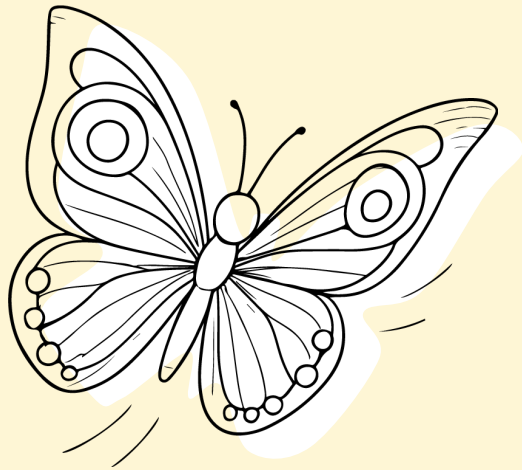
Hubs recognise that families can't focus on parenting programs, school transitions or child development when basic needs like food, nappies or dignity essentials aren't secure. By providing on-demand relief, from access anytime food pantries, frozen meals and bread donations to overnight bags and nappies and wipes pick-up, hubs remove the stress of survival. Relief is offered relationally, often bundled into everyday routines like kinder drop-offs, coffee mornings or casual playgroups, so it feels normalised. Food relief becomes a connector where families come for groceries but stay for conversation, and families who come for conversation can leave with supplies or a special treat too.



Example in action

Frozen meals, goodie bags, uniforms and lunches lighten the load during family transitions, like going back to work or managing multiple children.

Guardian angels supporting through crisis



When pushed to the brink, a mum finds a crisis compass and community in her hub.

When you've got kids, you can't be vulnerable.

I kept pushing on, even as things stacked higher and higher, housing falling apart, kids running wild, food running short, money stretched too thin. I started to pull back from people because I was embarrassed about how bad it was getting.

But it all stopped when my pneumonia turned into a brain injury. I was in hospital, in a coma, fighting to recover. Everything I had been holding together fell apart.

*On life support for a few months.
No rehab yet.*

I was trying to re-learn how to walk and talk, while my kids were left without the stability they needed.

It's so hard because you don't get flagged until you do something wrong. There's fear of repercussions from being honest.

That's when the hub became my lifeline. They treated me like a person. The staff built trust slowly, with a gentle, relational approach. They checked in when I didn't show up, they knew how to meet me where I was. That gave me the confidence to step through the door again.

They sat beside me in meetings with the school, so my kids weren't penalised for things outside their control. They helped me navigate the NDIS and specialist appointments, making sure nothing slipped through. They didn't hand me numbers and send me away, they walked alongside me.

If I didn't have my hub, things would've been very different for me.

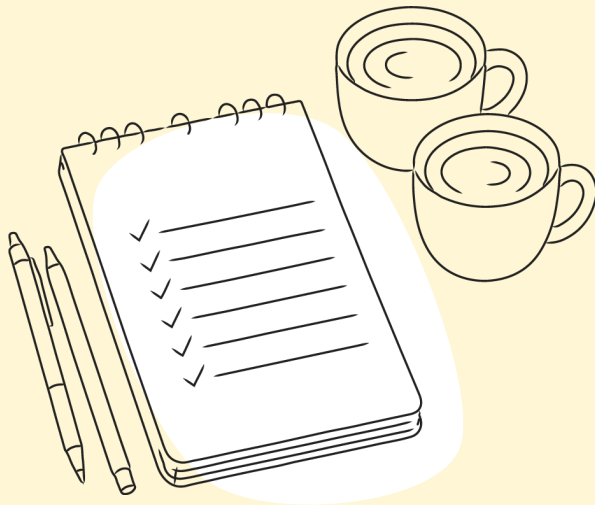
Bit by bit, I found myself again. The hub gave me a place to contribute, volunteering at reception, at emergency relief, in cooking classes.

I'm a social butterfly now, they can't get rid of me. Being present is so helpful even if you aren't participating, it helps grow confidence.

From isolation and fear, I now have friendships, purpose and the confidence to imagine a future. I volunteer every week, support other parents and dream of working in youth services. They were my guardian angels in crisis.

Connections are the foundation and stepping stones for anyone trying to rebuild their life.

Ticking off the list together



From scattered shelters and services, to a mother who ticks off the to-do list daily.

When I left my home with my three children to escape violence, I thought moving would give us a fresh start. Where did I want to go? To be near my sister in another state. But to get there was not easy. We moved between five different shelters. No stable housing. My son asked me,

How long are we staying here?

It was so hard and I needed to work, but...

My kids are running everywhere. I had to quit my job.

I had to take care of my children. The kids were running everywhere and their behaviours were getting harder. I was doing everything for them, and it took us forever to leave the house in the morning.

The first real connection came through the hub. That made all the difference. I met a worker who sat beside me, listened, and showed me respect. We started to tick things off the list together, one by one. She didn't plan *for* me, but *with* me.

The hub pulled the services together. Housing, Centrelink, childcare, school, therapy. All in one place. They linked my kids into speech therapy, occupational therapy and play therapy.

I didn't know my son was delayed. In my home country, they would just think he was shy.

The hub pushed for proper screening for my son. For once, I wasn't left to fight for recognition. They also helped with the everyday things that weighed me down — food parcels, school uniforms, letters for appointments.

My caseworker got the job she was destined for, she planned everything with me. She was like a mother who helped me, gave me advice, helped raise my kids.

Every morning and every night we'd tick off a checklist together. Slowly, things started to feel calmer.

There was no shame. Just people who understood that everything in my life was connected — housing, money, kids, trauma, and who gave me the respect and acceptance I'd been missing. Now, I am getting the results. I am in control of my life.

I want to help a lot of other women. I don't want anyone to go through what I've been through.



Theme 5

Ongoing connection & belonging



Theme 5

Ongoing connection & belonging



More than services, hubs become homes for community in themselves. Families described hubs as places where they feel less alone, differences are normalised and culture and identity is affirmed. Multicultural celebrations, playgroups for Aboriginal families and neurodivergent groups makes sure all families are included, while long-term relationships with staff and volunteers turn hubs into places of belonging.

Why this matters

Before families arrive at hubs, many describe deep disconnection. Parents are often moving away from grandparents and kin networks, or arriving in Australia without extended family support. Others are escaping violent or unsafe relationships, coping with partners who fly-in-fly-out for work, or living with the instability of unemployment. Some talk about feeling judged by services, or carrying the weight of racism, stigma and repeated system failures. The result is isolation, stress, and a sense of having to get through alone. Hubs change that story.

They create spaces where families are not just welcomed, but recognised and included, like a village that helps them raise their families. Playgroups, cultural events and informal drop-ins are entry points, but what grows is a sense of long-term belonging. Parents describe finding “their people” and building relationships that carry responsibility and care for each other.

For many, this belonging extends well beyond their own children. Families want to stay part of hubs as volunteers, peer leaders, or paid staff. Belonging is not just felt, it inspires action.

“We’re more connected, to others and ourselves.”

Family interview

“Family Zone is my family.”

Family interview



Accepted and less alone

Inclusive spaces and programs where families feel they belong

This looks like:

- Sensory rooms for quiet time out
- Neurodivergent playgroups
- Communication boards for non-verbal children
- Support when you need it.



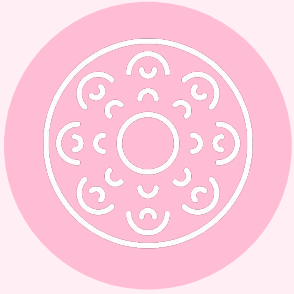
“The neuro group, it helps me feel less alone.”

“Cooking veggie burgers, it was good to do something without instructions.”

“We don’t go to play centres, it’s quieter in the neurodivergent playgroup.”

For families raising neurodivergent children, mainstream playgroups or play centres can feel overwhelming, noisy, and stigmatising. Hubs respond by offering playgroups, parent programs, family fun days and cooking classes designed through a behavioural and child development lens. These inclusive activities create safe, accepting ways for all children and parents to get involved. Children spend time alongside others who eat, play and communicate like them, while parents connect with peers who understand their journey. This normalisation of difference strengthens bonds between parents and their children, reduces isolation and provides a safe space for families to keep showing up.

“They helped me understand what’s going on in his brain.”



Multicultural community and belonging

Ownable places and times to gather as a community

This looks like:

- Whole of community cultural celebrations
- Programs that families can bring their lived and/or living experience into
- Flexible spaces that family groups can use to gather, share and swap food.



“Not just a cooking class, it’s therapy.”

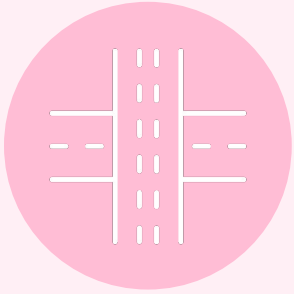
“Harmony Day is printed in my head.”

“Before I was a very confident woman.”

“200+ people for NAIDOC.”

For many families, starting a new life in Australia has come with racism, loss of identity or isolation. Hubs take a community development and place-based approach that celebrates the diversity of their communities. Annual events like Harmony Day, Eid Celebrations and NAIDOC Week sit alongside everyday activities such as multicultural cooking groups and language-based playgroups. Together, these create opportunities for families to find one another, build community and feel a sense of connection and shared responsibility to people and place. These gatherings are not just social, they are therapeutic. They restore confidence, affirm identity and make hubs ownable places of connection where food, knowledge and culture are shared in collective and communal ways.

“I lost myself here [in Australia].”



Understanding intersectionality

Recognising and embracing multiple identities, relationships and lived experiences

This looks like:

- Normalising diversity in families
- Celebrating multiple caregivers
- Onsite training pathways linking theory to reality
- Cultural competency training to assist refugee families.



"We bring law, immigration, lived experience, it all helps."

"Really good at working with kids with additional needs and will accept them."

"There is a common set of skills needed, such as cultural competency training and assisting refugee families and children with transitions."

Families don't arrive at hubs with single, simple stories, they bring multiple caregivers, cultural identities, developmental needs and life circumstances. Hubs honour this complexity. By supporting children to celebrate both foster, biological or kinship families, hubs affirm the emotional truth of children's relationships. When hubs have training facilities onsite, they can link the theories to practical realities of working alongside families. Together with staff who lean into their own systems experience, hubs model multiplicity and reduce the pressure on families having to "choose" or simplify their stories, and instead building communities that grow from diversity.

"It's not just naughty behaviour, it's unmet need."



Becoming a community

Relationships, belonging and shared ownership that turn hubs into homes

This looks like:

- Families actively talking about and bringing in new families
- Families regularly gathering and connecting at the hub
- Families returning for their next child's early childhood years
- Families desiring the hub follow them into the teenage years.



"Come here all the time, feels like home."

"Our own little community here. There's no drama."

"Meerilinga sounds like us."

"[Our hub] feels like a family."

At their strongest, hubs evolve from being "a service" into being "our place". Relationships, not compliance, are the foundation. Staff know families beyond their case notes, showing genuine care, asking after them if they miss a day and celebrating small wins. Over time, this consistency builds safety and trust, making it easier for families to ask for help before they reach crisis. Families describe the hub as their home, and themselves as "part of the furniture". Volunteers and community members, from locals to corporate partners, contribute their time and resources, upgrading backyards, collecting food, or helping at playgroups, widening what the hub can offer and embedding it more deeply in community life. The outcomes ripple into the community, and families desire to contribute and grow the hubs, achieving both individual- and community-level outcomes.

"It became their home, then they facilitated it [activities and community]."

From broken woman to power woman again



From loneliness, to a kitchen full of stories, smiles and self-confidence.

When I first arrived in Australia, I dreamed of a better life for my family. But the reality was different. I felt alone, I didn't know the language well, and the shock of starting again in a new country weighed heavily on me. Most days I stayed home, with no one to lean on.

I didn't know my own needs. I lost myself here.

It was a maternal child health nurse who first introduced me to the hub, walking me across to a playgroup. That warm handover made all the difference. The staff welcomed me straight away, with smiles and kindness, even though my English was limited. I felt respected, not judged.

From there, I found my way into the kitchen. At first it was helping out at event days, making food for the community. Then staff encouraged me to run my own cooking classes. So many people came.

It's so important to feel belonging.

I remember one girl telling me she had never seen her dad smile and talk to other people. And there he was, rolling dough, making pizza, laughing with the group. That moment stayed with me.

Cooking became more than food. We kept our hands moving, we didn't need to look at one another, but it was a vessel for stories.

It felt like healing, for all of us.

After those classes, the community started asking me for cake orders. Staff encouraged me to take it further. They sat with me, let me use the hub's internet, and helped me register an ABN. I even have a Facebook page now. What started in the hub's kitchen is now my business.

Different language creates two personalities: power woman, and broken woman. This hub helps both.

It is such a challenge to move to a new place with a different culture. There is so much to learn, new language, new culture, new laws. With everything else it can be overwhelming but the hub helped with this.

The changes didn't stop with me. My children grew up alongside this community. While I was building my confidence, they were safe in the crèche, learning to play with others, making friends, and feeling like they belonged to.

The hub gave me more than support. It gave me confidence, connection, and a way to build a future, for myself and for my kids. Now, I am studying all I can, and I want to support other women to articulate their feelings.

They are the reason why

A new mum who slept on the floor, builds a home, a future and a community.

I was seven months pregnant and had no family or friends here. I had left a violent relationship behind, so I had nothing. For a while I slept on the floor in a stranger's home, then moved into crisis accommodation where I gave birth. Those early days were so hard, no car, no support, no idea how to navigate the systems around me.

I was giving up.

The hub caseworker didn't just send me forms, they came to the hospital when my baby was born, they made sure the room at the hub's crisis accommodation was ready when I came back, even setting up furniture and my son's bed.

Those small acts showed me I mattered, and they built trust at a time when I had very little left. From there, the hub became my stepping stones.

The co-location of services is really helpful.

They supported me with housing inspections, Centrelink appointments, and linked me into counselling. When my son wasn't talking, staff sat with me and helped me connect to physiotherapists and speech pathologists. They didn't dismiss him as "just shy", they caught the signs early and made sure we were on the right path.

The practical help kept us going. Food from the hub's pantry when money was tight, childcare so I could breathe and start studying, regular check-ins when I felt overwhelmed. All those pieces added up to stability.

They helped me learn the skills of being a mum, because I had no experience.

Over time, I started to find my place in the community. First through playgroups and childcare, then volunteering, fundraising, helping others the way I had been helped.

I received so much help, now I want to give back.

The hub has given me belonging in a community where no one feels out of place. People from different backgrounds, languages and stories, all of us together, supporting each other. I am contributing to the community by volunteering at the childcare at the hub and raise money for others going through hardship.

I have a future for me and my son. The hub supported me to keep going, and this community is the reason why I now feel strong enough to give back.



This story is based on lived and/or living experience, but has been altered and anonymised for illustrative purposes. All names have been changed for privacy.

Section 5

Hub patterns in action



Hub patterns in action

Hub patterns are universal practice patterns that were observed and synthesised from across the five ECHs we visited. Although the patterns are universal, the way each ECH applied and delivered the pattern differed, according to the place-based and responsive ways that they have found work well for their communities and work well for their funding and contractual arrangements.

To demonstrate the hub patterns in action, this section details five ECH journey maps presented over two components:

- A high-level description of the **family experience**, written as per what families were thinking, feeling and doing throughout the interactions with the ECH; and
- A high-level **hub patterns in action** map that demonstrates which practice patterns are underlying the family's experience.

The journey maps are synthesised from multiple family, staff and practitioner experiences at the five ECHs we visited, in order of sites we visited during the research:

- Our Place, Morwell, Victoria
- Barnardos Children's Family Centre, Auburn & South Coast, New South Wales
- Lutheran Care Family Zone, Ingle Farm, South Australia
- The Benevolent Society Early Years Place, Coomera & Nerang, Queensland
- Meerilinga, Beechboro, Western Australia

Pattern 1: Safe & trusting foundations

Pattern 2: Children's wellbeing & development

Pattern 3: Parent confidence & capability

Pattern 4: Wrap-around home support

Pattern 5: Ongoing connection & belonging

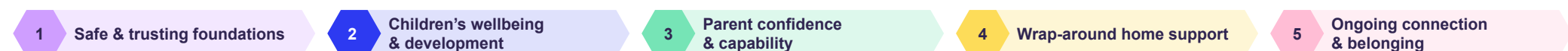
- 1.1  Relational ways of engaging
- 1.2  Warm introductions and handovers
- 1.3  Welcoming environments
- 1.4  Community-based, long-term staff
- 1.5  Cultural and community presence
- 2.1  Continuity catches
- 2.2  Linking home and hub
- 2.3  Supporting children with disabilities
- 2.4  Continuity and aligning with partners
- 3.1  Support with life's needs
- 3.2  Connecting and integrating services
- 3.3  Stepping stones to confidence
- 3.4  Dad's programs and men's modelling
- 3.5  Participant to volunteer pathways
- 4.1  Crisis compass and navigation
- 4.2  Flexible program design
- 4.3  Low or no cost fees
- 4.4  On-demand food relief
- 5.1  Accepted and less alone
- 5.2  Multicultural community and belonging
- 5.3  Understanding intersectionality
- 5.4 Becoming a community

Our Place, Morwell — Victoria

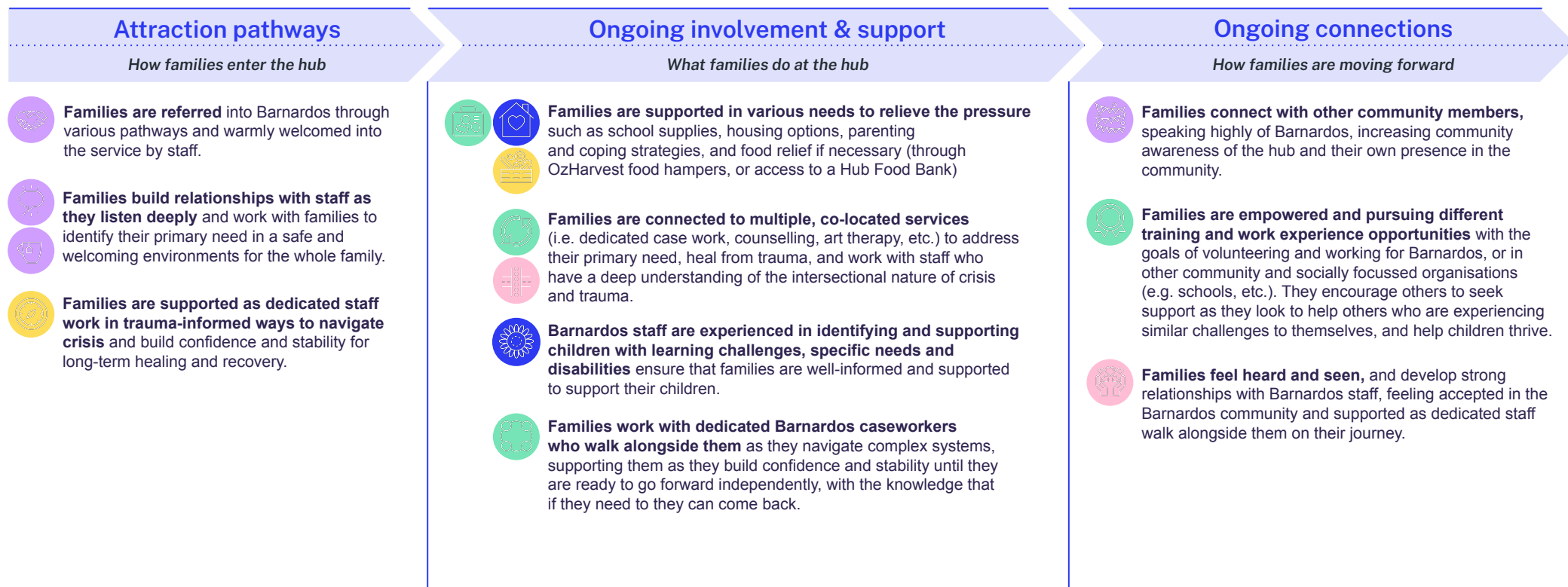


Family experiences (above)

Hub patterns in action (below)

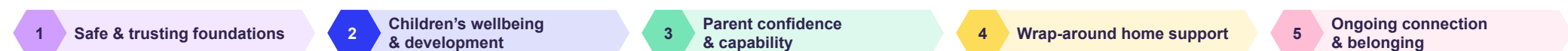
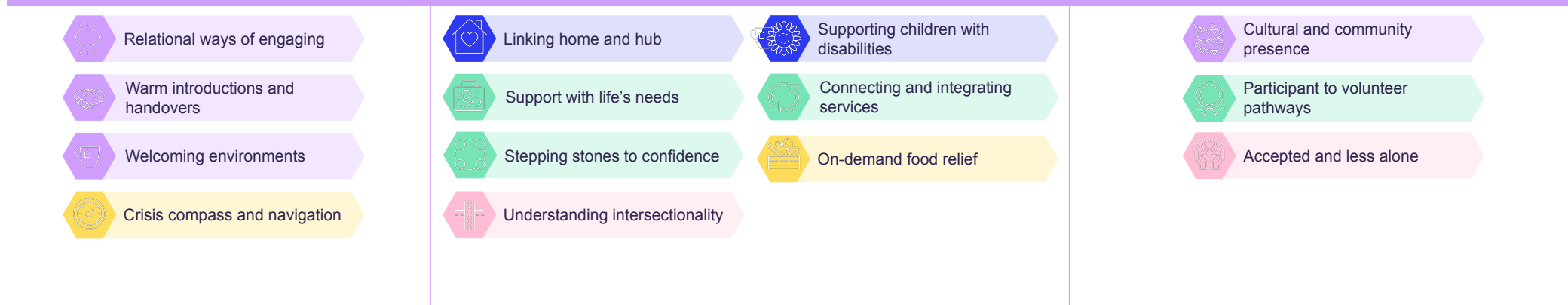


Barnardos Children's Family Centre, Auburn & South Coast — New South Wales



Family experiences (above)

Hub patterns in action (below)



Lutheran Care Family Zone, Ingle Farm — South Australia

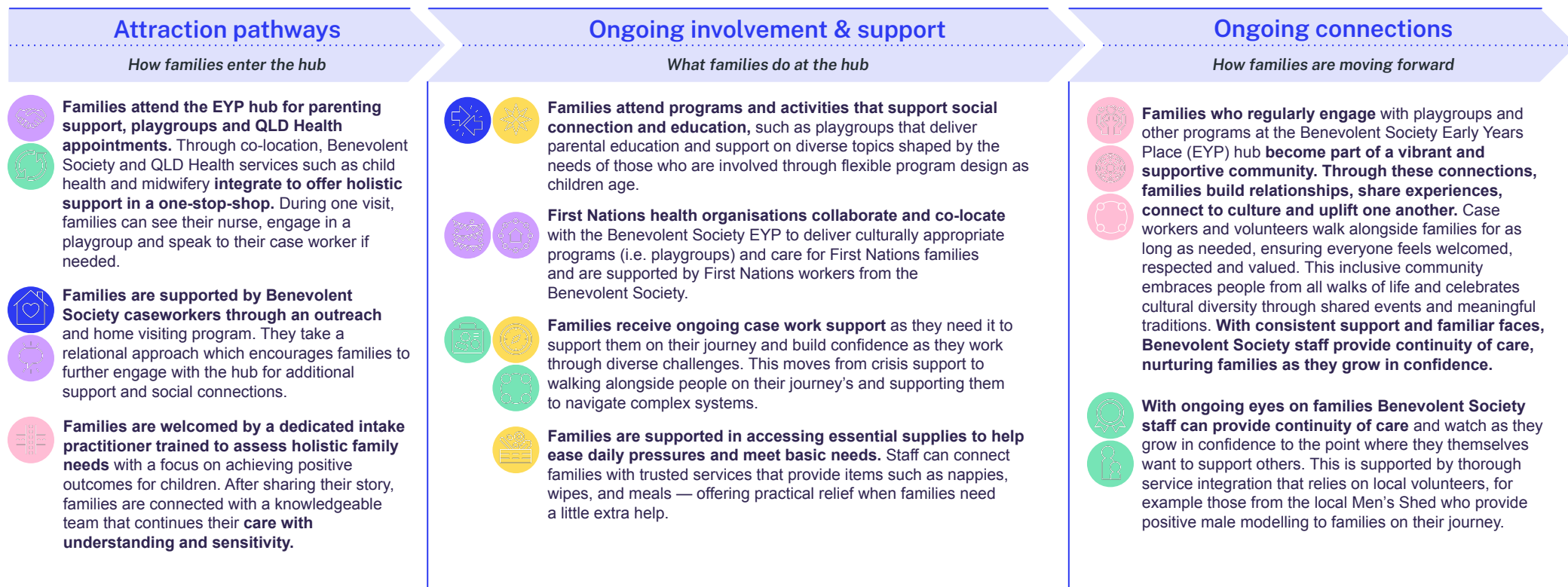


Family experiences (above)

Hub patterns in action (below)



The Benevolent Society EYP, Nerang & Coomera — Queensland

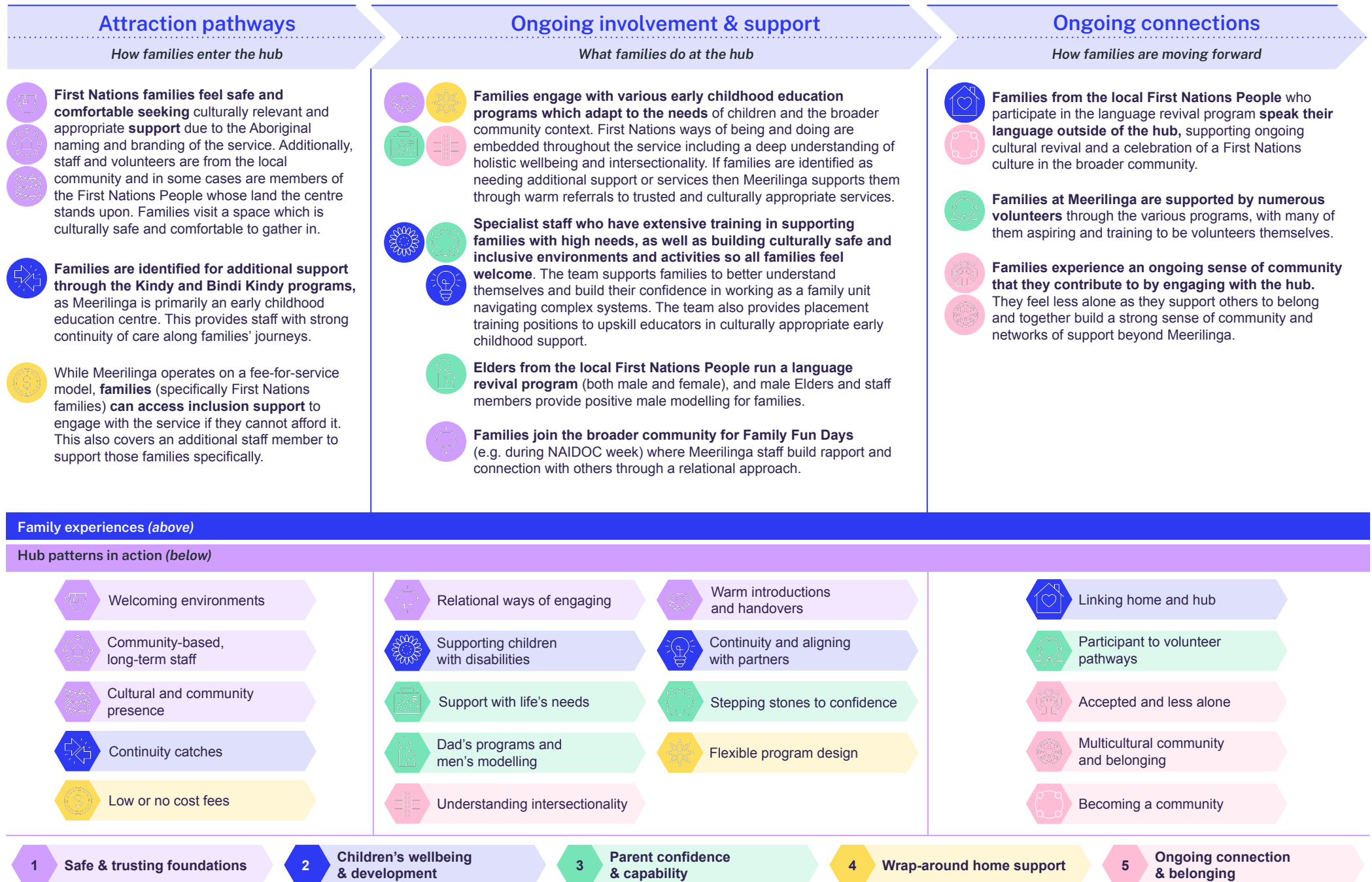


Family experiences (above)

Hub patterns in action (below)



Meerilinga, Beechboro — Western Australia



Section 6

Conclusion and key messages



Conclusion and key messages

This research found that Early Childhood Hubs (ECHs) have a transformative impact on children, families and their communities.

Families, practitioners and service leaders consistently shared stories of how hubs are changing lives, leading to children thriving, families finding belonging and communities growing stronger.

Increasing access to ECHs in other communities so that more families experiencing disadvantage and hardship have access to wrap around supports is vital to see them thrive.

What works for children and families?

The message from families was clear, hubs work. Families described hubs as places where they felt safe, comfortable, and supported, a one-stop shop where multiple services and supports come together under one roof. They valued the trusted relationships, the non-judgemental help and the ease of accessing holistic, wrap-around support. Families highlighted how hubs helped them navigate complex systems, build confidence and capability and strengthen community connections. Their voices, echoed through research, highlight that ECHs are strengthening outcomes and delivering lasting impact.

What works for hubs and practitioners?

The message from hubs was equally clear, they are achieving this impact despite navigating complex, fragmented systems and juggling multiple short-term funding streams. Many hubs are working well beyond their remit, filling service gaps, integrating supports and coordinating with local schools, health services and community partners to ensure continuity of care. Practitioners emphasised the need for sustainable, flexible funding that enables stability for families, consistent and culturally competent ways of working and relational, welcoming environments that reduce barriers and build trust.

Insights from the lived experiences of children, families, and practitioners revealed four clear priorities for the future of ECHs:

1. **Sustainable, flexible funding**
2. **Deeper integration across co-located services**
3. **Increased awareness and stigma-free pathways**
4. **Continued whole-of-childhood programming.**

Conclusion and key messages

Message to commissioners

To build on this success, Australia must invest in expanding access to ECHs and ensuring they are well-funded, well-integrated, and high quality, so that more children and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage and hardship, can benefit from the holistic, wrap-around support hubs provide.

Achieving this requires sustained investment in the relational fabric of hubs, the unseen work that connects families, services and staff. This “glue” function, the time, trust and capability that hold integrated services together, is critical to building safe, culturally responsive and trauma-informed environments where families truly thrive.

Gold standard recognition

ECHs should be recognised and resourced as the gold standard for integrated early years service delivery - a model that is proven, transformative, and ready to be scaled for greater national impact.

With thanks

To the children, families, practitioners and hubs who said, ‘Yes!’ to sharing stories about their lives and engaging with us, we thank you. Your strength and resilience was an honour to listen to.

How might we ensure all families can access an ECH, without fear, across Australia?

Sustainable, flexible funding

Ensure adequate, long-term, flexible funding.

So that families have a consistent, trustworthy place to go.

Integration across co-located services

Integrate all co-located services.

So that families can move through connected services with dignity.

Awareness and stigma-free pathways

Raise awareness of early, stigma-free access.

So that families feel proud to walk into hubs early, before crisis hits.

Whole-of-childhood programming

Continue integrated, wraparound support.

So that children experience continued whole-of-life, wraparound support.



Section 7

Appendices



Appendix A

References

Appendix A

References

In-text references

1. **Social Ventures Australia.** *Targeting investment where it counts*, 2025.
<https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Targeting-investment-where-it-counts-report-Feb2025.pdf>
2. **Deloitte Access Economics.** *Exploring need and funding models for a national approach to integrated child and family centres*, 2023.
<https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Final-Deloitte-brief-Aug-2023.pdf>
3. **Pascale, Richard T., Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin.** *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems*. Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2010.

Icon references

1. Couple by Oksana Latysheva from Noun Project (CC BY 3.0)
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3. Donate by Oksana Latysheva from Noun Project (CC BY 3.0)
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Appendix A

Hub and family recruitment

Appendix A

Internal ethics

Internal ethics hub approval

This project was formally reviewed and approved by TACSI’s internal Ethics Committee prior to any engagement with hubs, families or staff. The plan sets out a comprehensive, trauma-informed research protocol covering purpose, participant groups, recruitment via trusted hub staff, informed and ongoing consent, safeguarding, data handling and escalation pathways.

It requires that participation is always voluntary, that people can withdraw without consequence, and that hub teams help identify participants for whom an interview could be unsafe or re-traumatising.

It also specifies researcher conduct in the room (choice, control, culturally responsive practice, option for a support person), and outlines data security requirements, including secure Australian-based storage and limited-access use for reporting and advocacy.

Approval to proceed was contingent on these safeguards being in place and followed for both families and hub staff.

Working with Children Checks

TACSI & SVA project team members were all confirmed as having current Working with Children Checks (WWCC) valid across Australia.

Internal ethics hub application (TACSI)



Ethics approach (TACSI)



Appendix A

Hub & family recruitment

Discovery framework

Project theory of change: If we ensure lived experience voices are central by engaging the lived experience voices of families and children this will lead to SVA being able to advocate for the expansion of the services and ultimately better aligned childhood hubs in Australia.

Discovery objective: The core objectives of the TACSI work is to learn 'best practice' through the experiences and lens of families and children, and the service providers delivering them.

Paying attention to:

1. **Why hubs help:** Lived Experience Accessing ECHs, understanding good experiences and outcomes realised for families.
2. **How hubs help:** How these good experiences were specifically supported or enabled by the functions, structures and conditions (that will be crucial to fidelity at scale).

So that SVA can:

1. Advocate to Government for commitment to scaling ECH's.
2. Provide insight into the crucial elements of the ECH's for strong outcomes.
3. Elevate the voices of those with lived and living experiences, for greater governmental understanding to guide decision making.

Why hubs help: Understanding good experiences and outcomes realised for families, including:

- What helped? What hindered?
- What does good look and feel like?
- Emotional and practical needs
- Key touch points and variations
- Access pathways or waitlists
- Key transitions (ie. into school)
- Navigation experience
- Spatial experience

How hubs help: How good experiences were supported by the functions, structures and conditions, including:

- 'Outcomes' (as defined by Families)
- 'Outcomes' (as defined by Professionals)
- Spatial Experience (ie. communal reception)
- Helpful policies
- Helpful practices
- Funding innovations
- Service offerings and components
- Relationships, connections, roles
- Power dynamics
- Mental models or values
- Service gaps
- 'Glue' funding gaps*

**Professionals only*

Appendix A

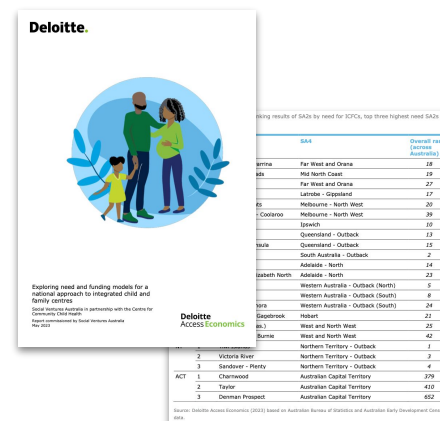
Hub & family recruitment

Recruitment plan (community selection criteria)

1. **Deloitte starting list (210 Hubs in 706 Communities)**
 - a. Community Practice Network: What hubs are known to be systematically achieving strong outcomes in communities experiencing disadvantage?
 - b. Service Mix: Must have core service mix of (at least):
 - i. Early Learning Program
 - ii. Maternal Child Health
 - iii. Family Support Services
 - iv. Allied Health Services
 - v. At least 1 Community-needs driven external service
 - vi. Informal Space
2. **Shortlist final criteria**
 - a. Cultural Safety Protocols (proxy Aboriginal Cultural Worker)
 - b. With a mix of:
 - i. Skew to centres located within highest areas of 'need' (based on selected data sets)
 - ii. City and Regional representation
3. **Final centre list (6-8) for initial query via SVA**
4. **Final 4 hubs opt-in for TACSI engagement**

1

Deloitte Access Economics report²
Deloitte & SVA



2

Shortlist final criteria¹
TACSI & SVA

The image shows a screenshot of a form titled '1. Deloitte Starting List (210 Hubs in 706 Communities)'. It contains several sections for selecting hubs based on various criteria, including 'Community Practice Networks', 'Service Mix', and 'Shortlist final criteria'. The form is designed to be filled out by TACSI and SVA.

3

Initial enquiry
SVA

The image shows a screenshot of a form titled 'How we'll engage with your hub, and the families and children you support'. It includes sections for 'What to expect', 'What to do next', and 'What to expect next'. The form is designed to be filled out by SVA.

4

Final hubs opt-in for engagement
TACSI & SVA

The image shows a screenshot of a form titled 'Storytelling Welcome Pack'. It includes a 'Hello!' message and a 'It's great to meet you' section. The form is designed to be filled out by TACSI and SVA.

Appendix A

Hub & family recruitment

Hub information & welcome pack

Hub information & welcome pack
Used as the primary briefing tool with hub leaders after the initial introductory call. It confirmed the purpose of the project, what we needed from the hub (spaces, staff leads, program times), and how and when we'd visit. Hubs could then share it internally to brief their team and line managers, and to line up families, partners and practitioners ahead of our visit.

Family information sheet

Given to hubs to pass on to families they already know and trust, so the invitation came from the hub not from TACSI & SVA. Hubs used it to identify families with good stories to tell, to explain what would happen on the day, and to follow up with families in the week of our visit.

Family information sheet

Stories of change at Our Place Morewell

24 - 28 March 2025
We're having some guests at Our Place Morewell

Hi there! We're Jess (she/her) & Dom (he/him) from The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, and we are looking to learn about the experiences of families and children at Our Place sites in Victoria. We look forward to having a cup of tea, playing and learning from you!

What will we be doing?
You'll see our friendly faces around the place during the week. We might join in during play time, share some food, and spend time with the amazing staff here. We might be curious about your life and ask you some questions, because we are interested to learn more about families and children's experiences of the hub, and what makes them so special.

Why are we doing it?
We want to show decision-makers the **real experiences** of Early Childhood Hubs. We want to highlight what's working well, and share some real experiences of families.

Do you have a story to share?
We're looking to speak to families who have experienced stories of change since coming to Our Place Morewell. If you'd like to be involved, please contact Jess.

Email: jess@taci.org.au or phone 0433 837 332.

Recognition of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people
We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who have been the custodians and owners of the lands on which we live, and we pay our respects to their elders.

Recognition of people with lived/living experience
We welcome and respect those with lived and living experience. Participation will be compensated for their time and expertise. Any acknowledgment will only occur with prior informed consent.

Do you attend these Children's Centres in Adelaide?

Parks, Elizabeth Grove, Hackam West or Ingle Farm

We'd love to hear your story!

Social Ventures Adelaide (SVA) and The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) are looking to learn from families who attend Children's Centres in Adelaide.

We want to understand:

- What you value about your Early Childhood Hub and why it's important to you.
- What experiences or positive changes you've noticed for your child and your family.
- Which supports you've found most helpful, and
- What other services your family have to navigate?

What's involved?

- **Family Interview:** We'll love to hear from families (including children, where appropriate) who are willing to share a little about their hub experience.
- **Seeing Your Hub in Action:** We'd like to visit and see the day-to-day connections between you, your children and the hub to see more genuine moments and experiences.
- **Sharing Your Story:** In stories about positive changes. These insights and stories will go into a report - only your story and opinion - helping decision-makers and key managers that what's really important to you.

Why does this matter?

We want to show decision-makers the **real experiences** of Early Childhood Hubs. We want to highlight what's working well, and share some real experiences of families.

Important Details
We'll have a phone call to cover all the ins and outs, including:

- **Timeline:** Story Month to April 2025.
- **Commitment:** How many years to be compensated for your time and insights.
- **Location:** Where best to meet.

How will this information be used?
We'll create a report featuring everyone's insights, highlighting the experience of Early Childhood Hubs. We'll use it to advocate for continued and improved support, ensuring that government and the broader community understand how critical these services are for children and families.

What's next?
If you're interested in sharing your story or want to learn more, we'll be in touch! Please reply to Jess at jess@taci.org.au or give her a call at 0433 837 332, and we can arrange a time to talk further.

Recognition of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people
We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who have been the custodians and owners of the lands on which we live, and we pay our respects to their elders.

Recognition of people with lived/living experience
We welcome and respect those with lived and living experience. Participation will be compensated for their time and expertise. Any acknowledgment will only occur with prior informed consent.

Stories of change at Lutheran Care Family Zone

Tuesday 1st - Thursday 3rd July 2025
We're having some guests at Family Zone!

Hi there! We're Jess, Dom & Bris, and we are from The Australian Centre for Social Innovation & Social Ventures Australia.

What will we be doing?
You'll see our friendly faces around the place during the week. We might join in during play time, share some food, and spend time with the amazing staff here. We might be curious about your life and ask you some questions, because we are interested to learn more about families and children's experiences of the hub, and what makes them so special.

Why are we doing it?
We want to show decision-makers the **real experiences** of Early Childhood Hubs. We want to highlight what's working well, and share some real experiences of families.

Do you have a story to share?
We're looking to speak to families who have experienced stories of change since coming to your centre. If you'd like to be involved, please contact Jessica Watson.

Email: jess@taci.org.au or phone 0433 837 332.

Recognition of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people
We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who have been the custodians and owners of the lands on which we live, and we pay our respects to their elders.

Recognition of people with lived/living experience
We welcome and respect those with lived and living experience. Participation will be compensated for their time and expertise. Any acknowledgment will only occur with prior informed consent.

Hub information pack

Visiting your hub

- When can we visit?
- What is the best way to collaborate and learn with you?
- We're hoping to speak with two of your staff - anyone come to mind?

... and programs that we could

Storytelling Welcome Pack

Hello!

It's great to meet you

taci.org.au
February 2025

THE AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Appendix A

Hub & family recruitment

Family information & consent pack

The consent packet was the plain-language guide we sent to hub leaders and families ahead of our visit so hubs and families could read it in their own time. On the day, the TACSI & SVA team went through it again in person to check understanding, answer questions and confirm what people were happy for us to do.

It covered who TACSI & SVA are, what the Early Childhood Hub Storytelling Project is about, what taking part could look like (conversation, observation, creative activities), how stories would be stored and de-identified, and people's rights to stop or withdraw at any time.

It also included the consent form where we recorded specific permissions for note taking, voice recording, photography and video, including whether images could be used publicly for this project or other TACSI & SVA work. This two-step approach (send first, confirm in room) made sure consent was informed, voluntary, and culturally- and trauma-aware.

Family consent pack

It's great to meet you!

A little book about sharing your story and spending time with us

THE AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

SVA innovators for good

tacsi.org.au

About this project

Project name: Early Childhood Hub Storytelling Project

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is exploring how families experience Early Childhood Hubs, aiming to understand how these hubs can best support children and families. They have asked us, The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) to learn from families about what's working well, what needs improving, and how we can create better services.

Talking with you can help us:

- Understand what's good about Early Childhood Hubs
- See what helpful and unhelpful experiences look like
- Create better support for children and families
- Share practical, social and emotional examples of what meets families' real needs

We like to keep things casual, fun and meaningful. That means some of our activities are different from a regular interview. But it's always up to you what we do or don't do.

We'll ask if you'd like to take part in:

- Observation about accessing hub **PICTURE, GROUP and service support.** This means:
 - Hanging out with you as you attend services
 - Walking alongside you at a service
- An Interview** A casual conversation about your family's experience with hubs. This means:
 - meeting you at a time and place of your choosing
 - asking you questions about what works and what doesn't
 - taking photos, videos and notes with your consent
 - Card sorting: Using picture cards to talk about likes and dislikes
 - Journey mapping: Drawing what happens over a day, week, or lifetime

We're interested in hearing about:

- what's easy and what's hard
- your ideas of how things could be improved

A few last things to keep in mind...

We take your privacy very seriously; we will only use your information with your permission.

We will respect your privacy and preferences:

- Your privacy and the information you share with us will be kept safe. Any identifiable information on paper will be stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible to the project team. Any electronic information will be stored in a way that only the project team can access through a user ID and password.
- We won't use your real name: We give everyone a made-up name throughout the process.
- We won't use your image without your permission: Any photos or videos of you will be kept on a locked hard drive. We'll ask for your consent before using an image of you in a document outside of the project team. You can give your consent on the following page.
- We're obligated to keep you and others safe: If you tell us something that suggests you or others might be at risk of harm, we are obligated to share any relevant information with the appropriate people.

This conversation will not affect any other services or outcomes of legal decisions:

- We're not linked to other services: What you tell us will not affect any current or future services you may be participating in. We use separate forms from them.
- We don't make referrals: We are not service providers and cannot directly refer.

After talking about tough stuff, it can help to talk to a good listener, who might be a friend, family member, or a professional. Write their name here to remind you.

By signing this form, I understand:

- the information sheet I was provided (the activities I may be asked to participate in)
- that notes, voice recordings, photos and videos will be used to inform the development of the project
- any information and stories I share will be de-identified and stored in password-protected folders
- real names or any information that could be used to identify me/us will be removed at any time
- I can stop the discussion/activity and/or refuse to answer any questions at any time
- I was given the opportunity to have a support person with me during the explanation of this information sheet

I can have a support person who I choose present during the interview and/or activities

All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction

I consent to take part in this research project

If I feel uncomfortable or triggered at any point TACSI will help me find the right person to talk to

Thanks for meeting with us! We want to cover a few things before we get started...

This is a guide to your participation with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and Social Ventures Australia (SVA).

Talking through this guide may get a bit boring, but it helps make sure we are sharing your story in a way that feels right for you.

If you have any questions - at any point please ask us.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians and owners of the lands in which we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders of the past, present and emerging. We are committed to collaboration that furthers self-determination and creates a better future for all.

We acknowledge the world is changing and that all of the challenges facing our society will be more deeply felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Embedding a cultural lens across all of our work must be a priority in any strategy that is created and implemented.

What does taking part in this project mean?

Getting involved, having a conversation with us and the amount of time you spend is all up to you.

We are requesting you to take part in our research because you have lived or living experience of the subject. Participating in the project means meeting with our team to chat about your experiences.

We want to hear about your own know-how that has come from your experiences because we believe that this kind of expertise can help others. We can meet in a place that feels comfortable for you. You get to choose what and how much you share. You can stop participation at any time, and you are free not to answer questions if you choose.

We'll ask if you'd like to take part in:

- Observation about accessing hub **PICTURE, GROUP and service support.** This means:
 - Hanging out with you as you attend services
 - Walking alongside you at a service
- An Interview** A casual conversation about your family's experience with hubs. This means:
 - meeting you at a time and place of your choosing
 - asking you questions about what works and what doesn't
 - taking photos, videos and notes with your consent
 - Card sorting: Using picture cards to talk about likes and dislikes
 - Journey mapping: Drawing what happens over a day, week, or lifetime

Consent form

I have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Information Sheet. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the research activities described to me for the length of time required.

By signing this form, I understand:

- the information sheet I was provided (the activities I may be asked to participate in)
- that notes, voice recordings, photos and videos will be used to inform the development of the project
- any information and stories I share will be de-identified and stored in password-protected folders
- real names or any information that could be used to identify me/us will be removed at any time
- I can stop the discussion/activity and/or refuse to answer any questions at any time
- I was given the opportunity to have a support person with me during the explanation of this information sheet

I can have a support person who I choose present during the interview and/or activities

All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction

I consent to take part in this research project

If I feel uncomfortable or triggered at any point TACSI will help me find the right person to talk to

About us

THE AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation for us just say TACSI (or short) is an independent not-for-profit, non-government, non-religious organisation. We believe that people know best what's hard for them and what helps. We work with people to design solutions together that improve outcomes and support better living at every stage. You can have a relative, friend or other person with you during the explanation, interview and during activities. **Both TACSI and SVA are working on this project together:**

SVA innovators for good

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) was created to solve challenging social problems. We spend-up innovation in the social sector so more people in Australia can live their best life. As Australia's most innovative social impact organisation, we help solve challenging social problems. Putting our extensive know-how to work re-designing systems. Helping institutions think differently. Working hand in hand with our partners and communities to take real action on social change.

How will my information be used?

We'll always keep personally identifiable information separate from your name and story.

The information you share with us will be used to make a report for SVA (who are funding this work), unless at any point you ask us to exclude what you've shared. What we talk about today and in the future will be used to help us:

- learn about the challenges you experience and your ideas for how things could be better
- come up with opportunities and solutions to help others in similar situations
- share what we learned in different ways
- help us share real stories about what your life is really like with those people who make decisions about services and policy
- help us do better work with people

A fictional character for supporters or public

In presentations for supporters or public

A project summary on our website

A report for supporters or the public

If questions pop up later on, there are people you can reach out to:

If you change your mind about something you have shared or have questions about this project, contact Jess from TACSI. Here's their details: Phone: 0432 837 322 Email: jess.sutton@tacsi.org.au

During this conversation, may TACSI:

Take notes	Yes	No
Make a voice recording	Yes	No
Take photos for TACSI & SVA to use publicly for this project	Yes	No
Take photos for TACSI & SVA to use publicly on other projects	Yes	No
Take videos to support the project	Yes	No

Do you have any special considerations when it comes to photos?

Name of participant:

☐ I agree to participate (tick box)

☐ I agree for my child to participate (tick box)

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Follow up services

We strive to make our research experiences as smooth and gentle as possible. In the unlikely event that you should have discomfort, distress or harm, we are required by law to make a report to your jurisdiction who will take the necessary steps to assist you in finding the appropriate service to speak to. If you would like us to share any public outputs from this project with you, please write your email address here.

Email: _____

Appendix A

Hub & family recruitment

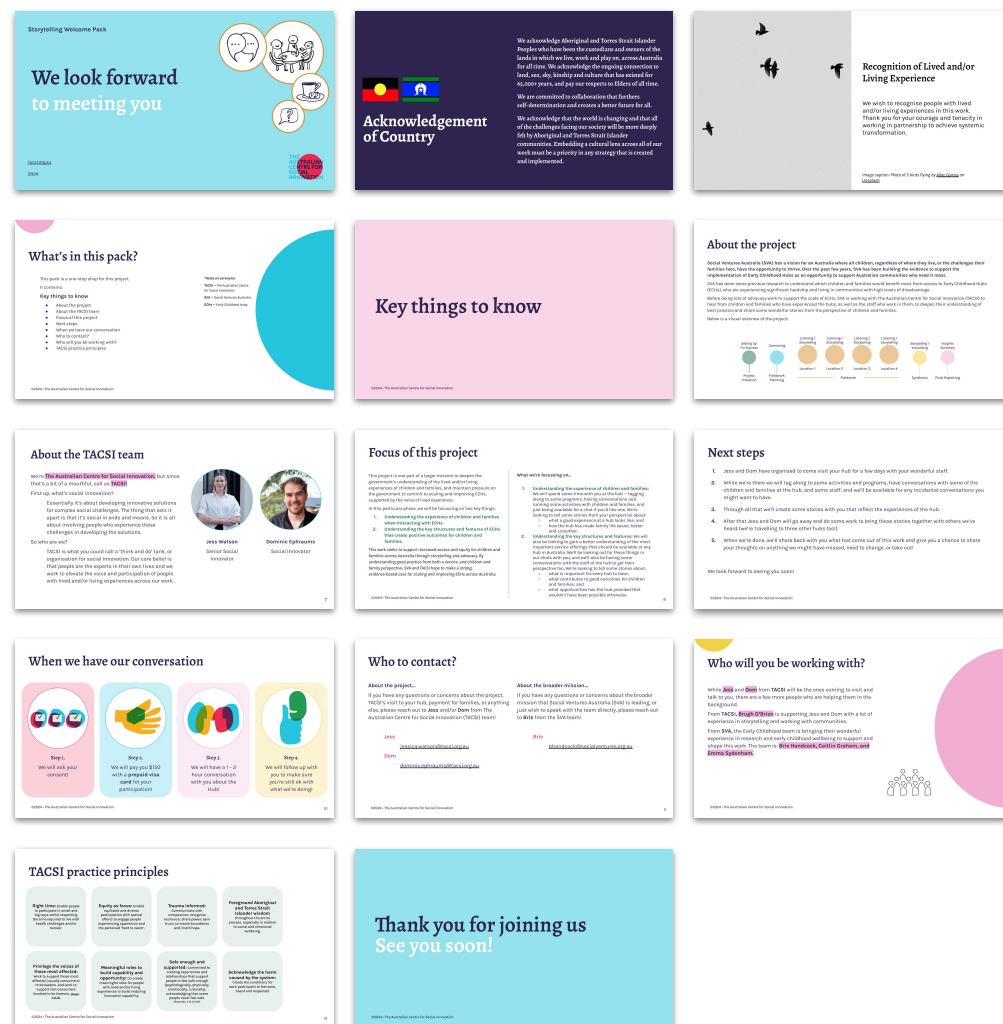
Family welcome pack

This was the friendly, plain-language version of the project sent to hubs to share with families before our visit, so people knew who TACSI & SVA were and why we wanted to talk with them.

It offered families the option of a quick call beforehand to ask questions or check comfort. Then, when we met in person, we went over the same information in the room to make sure it still felt okay, to explain what the conversation would involve, and to confirm they could stop at any time.

The pack also clearly stated that families would receive a \$150 prepaid card for taking part, so hubs could tell people up front what to expect. This was offered or given to families to take-away at the end of the session and the project team's contact details were pointed out if they had any follow-up questions.

Family welcome pack



Appendix B

Fieldwork principles & approaches

Appendix B

Fieldwork principles & approaches

Participatory principles

TACSI's deeply social and relational way of working is supported by our participatory principles, noted below, which help us to understand and unearth what matters for people, including those who are experiencing the challenges we seek to solve (people with lived and/or living experiences) and those people who seek and do to serve and support them (leaders, policy, frontline, practitioners, community).

Right time: Enable people to participate in small and big ways whilst respecting the time required to live with health and family challenges and/or recovery.

Equity as focus: Enable equitable and diverse participation with special efforts to engage people experiencing oppression and the perceived 'hard to reach'.

Trauma informed: Communicate with compassion; recognise resilience; share power; earn trust, co-create boundaries and instil hope.

Foreground Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander wisdom: Throughout the entire process, especially in relation to social and emotional wellbeing. We are deeply committed to incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices and thinking in our structures and processes as demonstrated through our principles of working and our Many Threads of Allyship framework (website).

Privilege the voices of those most affected: Work to support those most affected to be leaders & work to support others involved to be learners. (Roper, C et al.)

Meaningful roles to build capability and opportunity: Co-create meaningful roles for people with lived and/or living experiences to build enduring innovation capability.

Safe (enough) & supported: Committed to creating experiences and relationships that support people to feel safe enough to participate and be heard (psychologically, physically, emotionally, culturally), acknowledging that some people never feel safe. (Reynolds, V.)

Acknowledge the harm caused by the system: Create the conditions for each participant to feel seen, heard and respected.

Appendix B

Fieldwork principles & approaches

Storybuilding approach

For families who engage with Early Childhood Hubs, a participatory engagement cycle for 'Storybuilding' was used that followed an iterative method of listening, co-creating and telling stories around children and families' lived experiences.

This approach follows a generative design research methodology that seeks to surface both the explicit experiences of community and the deep tacit, latent knowledge held in community hubs. This approach provided us with the diverse perspectives and contexts needed to understand how ECHs might be adapted at scale, and the conditions that support positive outcomes for children and families.

The approach allowed us to:

- Gather insights from diverse group of children and families
- Build relationships, be place-based and immersed in hubs
- Tell children, families and hub stories of impact and change
- Better understand the operational elements of hubs
- Understand key fidelity points of ECHs that are common and should be advocated for at scale
- Deeper insight into the experience of children and families and their thoughts about what is needed
- Focus on the lived experience of children and families in populations identified as highest need
- Design visual representations as well as written stories of children, families and professionals

Positive deviance

SVA's research has shown the current ECH landscape is patchy, with diverse models of scale and capacity, major gaps in coverage and no national approach to delivery. It has highlighted no responsibility for specific outcomes, and no overarching approach to measuring or assessing quality. The research identifies 210 ECHs across Australia leaving a significant proportion of children and families who would benefit from an ECH unable to access one. In addition, those who do access a hub may not experience their full potential due to variability around quality and capacity.

For this project, we applied a positive deviance³ approach. This involved reframing deviations from the norm as potential sources of inspiration and solutions. With the support of SVA, we identified several successful examples of best practice Early Childhood Hubs (210), that additionally fall into some of the 706 shortlisted identified communities formed by Deloitte Access Economics².

By intentionally extracting valuable insights from child and families' experiences of these centres to inform effective strategies and advocacy for scale. This approach encourages strength-based collaboration, allowing participants to share what works.

Appendix C

Fieldwork generative & narrative tools

Appendix C

Fieldwork generative & narrative tools

Semi-structured and generative interviews

This project used a semi-structured interview approach to design research, through which we were able to create a dynamic platform in our conversations with children and families allowing us to explore families' experiences, preferences, and needs when interacting with ECHs. While guided by core lines of enquiry, the flexibility in this framework allows for both depth and spontaneity.

Unlike rigidly structured interviews, this approach allowed the TACSI team the freedom to delve into unexpected insights while maintaining a general outline of topics to be covered. By fostering open-ended dialogue and encouraging participants to express their thoughts freely. Semi-structured interviews enabled a rich understanding of families' behaviours, motivations and experiences. This method uncovered valuable qualitative data and cultivated rapport between researchers and participants, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to innovation and empathetic design solutions.

Generative interviews served us better when talking to children and families who had an experience of an ECH. This included activities such as journey mapping, card sorting or sketching. These activities aimed to stimulate creativity and encourage participants to express their thoughts and ideas freely. These generative techniques are also referred to as 'Yarning with a purpose', by Aunty Vickey Charles.



Appendix C

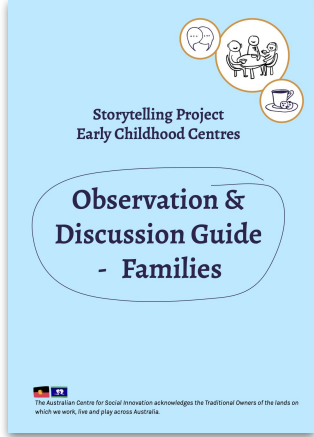
Fieldwork generative & narrative tools

Rapid ethnography

Ethnographic approaches in research allowed for deep immersion into the context of users, observing their behaviours, and understanding their needs, which enriched the process with valuable insights. By prioritising user perspectives and cultural nuances, co-design and research informed by ethnography fosters more inclusive and effective solutions.

In this work, researchers spent one-two days-in-the-life of an Early Childhood Hub interacting with families, experiencing the services as they experience it. By taking the time to understand the ups and downs of family life, we observed points where family stress is met by the service and how this works to support change.

Observation & discussion guide



Storytelling Project
Early Childhood Centres

Observation & Discussion Guide
- Families

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work, live and play across Australia.

Understanding hubs in three ways

Family and children's "experience" is an abstract concept yet its elements are tangible and can be seen and heard. We can understand in three ways...

- Conversations in place**: Engaging in a genuine, informal conversation, 'yarning with a family' or 'hanging out', where families share their stories, reflections, and aspirations.
- Activities with children***: Spending quality, unscripted time with a family in their natural setting, with dedicated activities and prompts for children to engage with.
*To be completed with parent and/or guardian present
- Conversations with staff**: Facilitating open, reflective discussions with staff to explore their insights, experiences, and the collaborative spirit that drives the hub's success.

Conversations in place

Discussion guide

The experience:

- What makes it easy to attend this centre?
- What makes a positive experience?
- What makes people feel welcome? Or not welcome?
- What value does the centre bring to their life?
- What makes this centre feel different to other early childhood services/programs?

The support:

- What are the strengths of the support at the centre?
- What are the challenges of accessing support?
- What other services do you interact with outside of the centre?
- Are there any areas you'd like more support in?

The connections:

- What helps families to connect?
- What gets in the way of families connecting?

Hanging out

Discussion guide

A day at the centre:

- What are the key moments of your day at the centre?
- Which part of your routine feels most special?
- Who are the people you like to interact with?

A photo diary

- What are the things that make the centre special for you?
- How do these things make you feel?
- In what ways do these images represent the heart of your experience at the centre?

Million dollar question:

- If you had three million dollars, where would you invest to make the centre even better?
- What changes or additions would have the greatest impact on your family's daily life?
- How might these new ideas create more opportunities make life better at the centre?
- Would this be good for other families as well?

Staff conversations

Discussion guide

Why hubs help:

- From your perspective, what positive outcomes have families experienced since accessing the hub?
- Can you share examples of success stories that highlight the unique value the hub brings to families?
- In your experiences, what one value or element of the hub stands out as most transformative for families?
- How have families described the impact of the hub on their daily lives and overall well-being?
- Looking back from before the hub to now, what improvements in family outcomes do you observe?

How hubs help:

- Which specific policies and practices have played a key role in supporting the positive experiences of families?
- How do the operational functions and structures within the hub contribute to successful outcomes?
- In what ways do your personal contributions or the team's collaborative efforts shape the hub's service delivery?
- What structural supports or funding arrangements (including any innovative or untied funding) enable you to respond effectively to community needs?
- Can you identify any "glue" or gaps in funding and service offerings that, if addressed, could further enhance the hub's impact on families?

Observation of the hub

Observation guide

Culture

- What do the spaces look and feel like?
- What is considered a 'status symbol'?
- What logos & illustrations of the service are used?
- Is jargon is used?
- How understandable is it to outsiders? New families?

+ Stories

+ Rituals and routines

+ Control systems

+ Org structure

+ Power structures

Appendix C

Fieldwork generative & narrative tools

Family experience map

TACSI will draw on our own experience of narrative practices to help to ensure that children and families are invited to share in strength-based, useful and hopeful ways, allowing them to identify the supports and structures that helped them along their journey. We will also utilise evidence-based tools to support a trauma-informed approach. This will produce tangible stories of lived experiences that SVA could use to deepen their understanding of family experiences.

This project utilised journey and experience mapping to elicit stories beneath the surface level, uncovering what families feel, know and dream in three distinct phases of their engagement with ECHs:

- Life before engaging with an ECH
- The experience whilst engaging with an ECH
- Outcomes and dreams after engaging with an ECH.

By mapping out user journeys, researchers gained invaluable insights into the user's interactions, facilitating the creation of more seamless and user-friendly experiences. This tool assisted us in uncovering insights and guided us in telling more empathetic and family-centred stories.



Appendix C

Fieldwork generative & narrative tools

Prompt cards & conversation guides

Essential tools include open-ended questions for depth, and probing techniques for clarity, to support the conversation to stay on track. TACSI will develop interview guides for structure, to ensure the research team and participants work towards consistency.

Prompt cards are tactile techniques that can assist with brainstorming and prioritisation. Cards assisted in drawing insight out of a conversation.

For instance, when answering the question, *“What makes a good experience when interacting with a hub?”*, or *“What services do you use and not use at the hub?”*.

Participants were asked to sort cards that represent aspects of a good experience (as defined by the SVA research) into two piles, ie. Is this important: Yes or No.

Participants may then be asked to prioritise their top three most significant positive experiences from the yes pile and explain why these were so significant to them and what should be retained in other hubs.

Prompt cards



Appendix C

Fieldwork generative & narrative tools

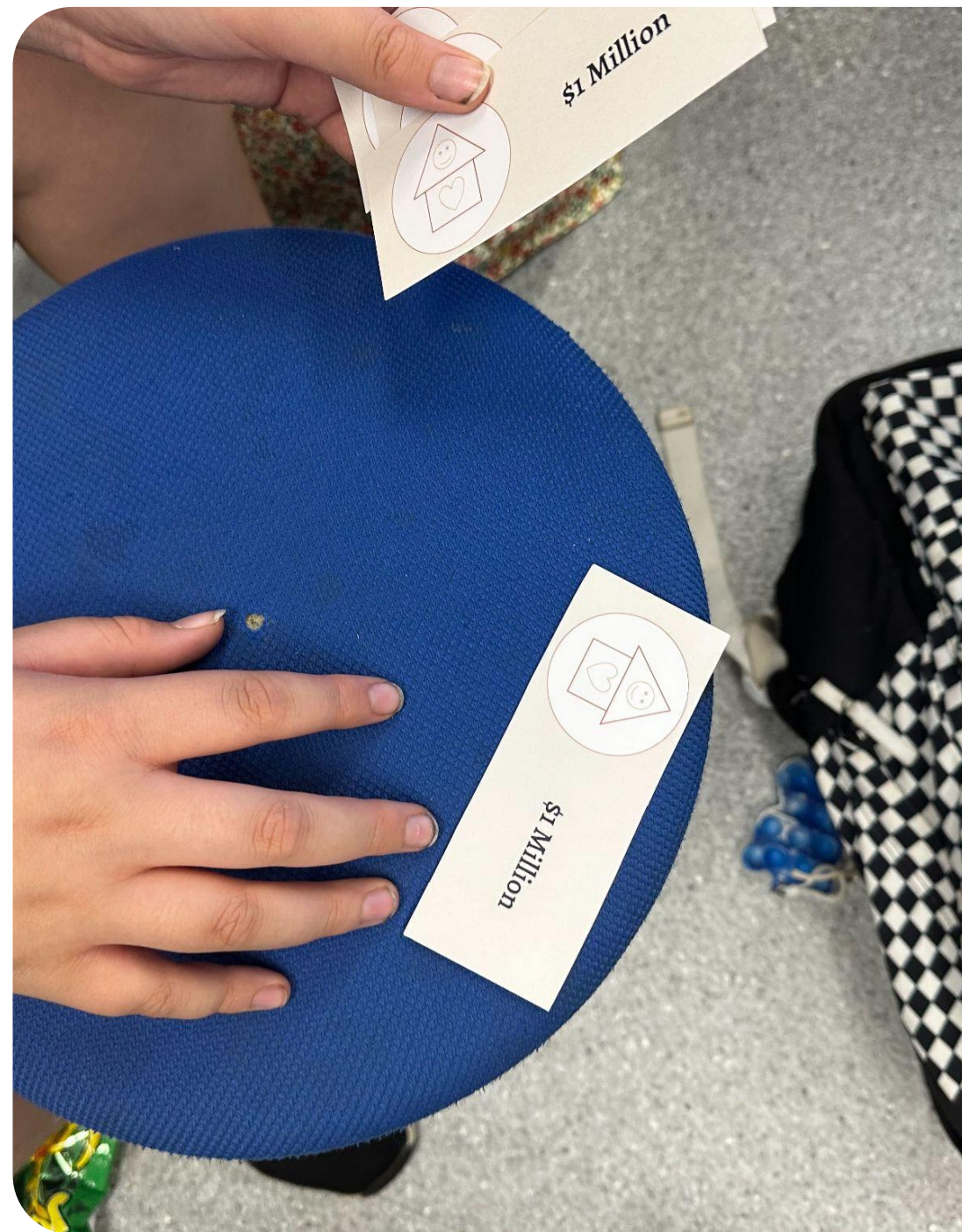
Million dollar question

As part of fieldwork we used a generative prompt with both parents and children, *“If you had \$4 million to spend at your hub, what would you invest in?”*.

The aim was to surface what matters most to families, not to cost a real capital plan. It let people name what they want more of (programs, outreach, transport, food, cultural activities, allied health on site), what they think others in their community need, and what would make the hub feel even safer and more welcoming.

With children, it was used in a lighter, imaginative way (more play, outdoors, animals, creative spaces) and helped triangulate family priorities. We used the activity across hubs to see patterns in investment ideas, to test whether current funding settings match what families value, and to give SVA & TACSI story material that is clearly community-led.

This information directly informed ‘ECH conditions for best work’ (page 31), and the ‘Conclusion and key messages’ (pages 86-87).



Appendix D

Credits and consent

Appendix D

Credits and consent

Hub leadership and participating teams

Barnardos: Dr. Rob Urquhart, Maria Corsiglia, Kirsten Phillips, Grace Hong, Rosa Ciravolo.

Benevolent Society: Violetta Humphreys, Amy O’Grady, Tammy Kjeldsen.

Lutheran Care Family Zone: Kerry MacGrath, Daniela Borg, Bikram, Shukria, Isaac.

Meerilinga: Leanne Lee, Amanda Taylor.

Our Place: Jen Doultree, Hannah Copland, Mellonie Dawes, Isaac.

Engagement and consulting teams

Social Ventures Australia: Emma Sydenham, Caitlin Graham, Brie Handcock.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation: Danielle Abbott, Brugh O’Brien, Melanie Rayment, Jessica Watson, Dominic Ephraums.

With thanks for the ongoing support and feedback from the **Minderoo Foundation**.

Participating families

Most of all, thank you to the **children and families** who shared their stories with us and are contributing to the success of the ECH model by creating safe and trusting relationships and ongoing belonging in their communities.

Consent to use photography

Thank you to the hubs and families for providing photography with consent to use in this report.

All images are credited to the appropriate hub. If any image has been mis-credited, please let us know.

sva

Social Ventures Australia
info@socialventures.org.au
socialventures.org.au



The Australian Centre for Social Innovation
info@tacsi.org.au
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