



# Putting children at the centre

Embedding Hubs and related  
integrated models in our early  
years system and beyond

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Produced on behalf of the Early Childhood Hubs Working  
Group of the National Child and Family Hubs Network

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## Acknowledgment of Country

Social Ventures Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the past and present traditional custodians and elders of this country on which we work. 'After the Rains' by Richard Seden for Saltwater People 2024

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## Executive summary

Australia is at a pivotal moment in early childhood reform. Significant initiatives like the \$1b Building Early Education Fund (Building Fund), the Service Delivery Price project (SDP), the 3-Day Guarantee, Thriving Kids, proposed reforms from the Department of Social Services (DSS), and the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034, offer an unprecedented opportunity to build a more equitable, child-centred early years system.

However, the potential benefits of these reforms will only be realised if they are connected, aligned, and grounded in equity. Hubs and other integrated models offer a platform to join early learning, health, and family supports, ensuring services work in partnership rather than in isolation. They demonstrate a model of proportionate universalism addressing the equity gap between universal and targeted early years services. By aligning current government investments around these early years models, Australia can reduce service duplication, maximise the return on public investment, and ensure all children start school thriving.

This paper uses the term Hubs to refer to a model of Child and Family Hub that has early learning as the front door. This term includes Hubs co-located with early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, school sites and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Integrated Early Years Services (ACCOs) where early learning is a key entry point for families. Hubs bring together services like child and family health nurses, parenting programs, playgroups and toy libraries, allied health, and family supports in one accessible location. Critically, they also include informal spaces where families can meet, connect and build social networks. Across the country, there are more than 230 Child and Family Hubs that have early learning as a front door, and more than 470 Hubs in total (also including Hubs on health sites, broader community sites and virtual Hubs).<sup>1</sup>

‘Related integrated models’ refers to other early years models that may be more applicable in different contexts, including ECEC Plus, Early Years Collaboration Models and intensive ECEC models.

## The challenge of a fragmented system with persistent vulnerability

Every child needs the right supports to thrive. However, universal ECEC services alone cannot close the gap for children experiencing vulnerability, who face disadvantages like insecure housing, family stress, health issues, family violence, disability, language barriers or limited local services.

Furthermore, families navigating these intersecting challenges bear the emotional and practical burden of navigating complex, siloed systems.

Despite best efforts, developmental vulnerability in Australia remains stubbornly high. The Australian Early Development Census 2024 identified:

- **13%** of children start school developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.

### This rises to...

- **20%** in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, and
- **27%** for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.<sup>ii</sup>

## Hubs and related integrated models: proven impact and Social Return on Investment

Hubs and related integrated models can deliver strong impact. Evidence shows that Hubs can:

- support faster identification of developmental vulnerability, increased uptake of referrals and improved child health outcomes

- improve child development outcomes
- strengthen parental engagement
- improve child safety and protection outcomes
- deliver significant social return on investment, **up to \$3.50 for every \$1 invested on one specific model**<sup>viii</sup>.

## The barrier of insecure funding

Despite clear evidence of impact,<sup>ix</sup> Hubs and related integrated models have limited coverage and are not well supported under current funding settings. Most rely on short-term grants, philanthropy or local champions, undermining:

- service quality, continuity and reach
- a stable, skilled workforce and trusted relationships that are central to impact
- the deliberate relationship efforts needed to hold services together around families.<sup>x</sup>

Integration does not happen automatically. It requires sustained investment in enablers. Without stable, long-term investment in integration enablers (the glue)<sup>1</sup>, these models' reach and impact, to support better outcomes for a larger number of Australian children and create a more efficient and effective service delivery system, remains unrealised.

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<sup>i</sup>This encompasses the relationships, people, systems, and backbone supports that hold services together. They include:

- coordination and integration roles
- shared systems (like common data platforms, referral pathways, shared case management tools and monitoring frameworks)
- local governance that brings education, health, and family supports together to sustain collaboration over time.

## The path forward

The current reform environment across education, health and social services creates a unique opportunity to embed Hubs and related integrated models as core infrastructure in Australia's early years system. By embedding integrated models as part of the priorities of programs – like the Building Fund, Service Delivery Price project (SDP) and subsequent funding reform process, and Thriving Kids – the Federal Government, in partnership with states and territories, can translate national policies into practical, community-level solutions that meet families where they are.

To make lasting change, ECEC must be integrated into a broader network of child and family supports, where educators, health professionals, and community workers

collaborate around each child and family's needs. This also requires the capacity to reach out and connect with families who are vulnerable or isolated and may be cautious about engaging with services.

Hubs have the potential to not only reduce duplication and improve outcomes for children but also maximise the social return on public investment. They are part of a proportionate universal response that ensures all children and families can access the services they need to thrive, with additional supports available where needed. Integrated models, including Hubs, offer an effective and efficient delivery mechanism, especially when they are embedded in communities of high disadvantage.

*Many families face the complexity of intersecting challenges that create barriers to accessing support. This includes past experiences of stigma, trauma, financial hardship, housing instability and social isolation, all which place an emotional and practical burden around navigating complex systems. By providing holistic, place-based, and co-located services – from playgroups and parenting programs to health, legal, allied health, and cultural support – integrated models such as Hubs can respond to diverse needs without needing families to re-tell their stories multiple times.*

Hub staff member

# Recommendations for embedding Hubs and related integrated models within Australia's early years system and beyond

These recommendations outline practical first steps for the Federal Government to embed Hubs and related integrated models within Australia's early years system and beyond.

## 1. Governance and accountability

### Establish a National Hubs and Related Integrated Models Plan

- Develop a National Hubs and Related Integrated Models Plan that sets out how these models support the Federal early years reform agendas and identifies priorities to sustain scaled delivery.

### Embed integration across major reforms and governance

- Elevate an integrated early childhood development system as a Prime Ministerial priority.
- Create interdepartmental and intergovernmental governance structures to clarify roles and responsibilities, develop shared objectives, KPIs, and outcomes measures across portfolios to incentivise and support more integrated service delivery, including Hubs and related integrated models.
- Streamline application, implementation and reporting processes across key reforms so service providers that support children and families can have efficient and less duplicative government engagement across portfolios.

## 2. Infrastructure and planning

**Leverage capital investment through the Building Fund** Use the \$500m Building Fund allocation for Government built centres to deliver equity through purpose built Hubs and related integrated models in communities of high early childhood disadvantage.

## 3. Integration

### Unlock existing funding in the system and expand service impact

- Provide long-term, flexible block funding for integration enablers (the glue) in new and existing Hubs in priority communities. This will help the existing system achieve its goals by reaching children who are not currently accessing services, ensuring greater uptake of services and avoiding service duplication. This could start with an investment of \$112m per year (with additional loadings for higher cost settings) to support approximately 200 Hubs. It should evolve to new recurrent funding models (see below).
- Develop an Integration Implementation Framework to drive consistent national integration, quality and improvement in integrated models including Hubs.

## 4. Workforce

### Support and grow a workforce with the skills to work in adaptive, multidisciplinary settings

- Design a Thriving Kids Workforce Plan that grows the capacity of the current workforce and uses existing Hubs and related integrated models to demonstrate and innovate effective relational and multidisciplinary practice.

## 5. Reform ECEC funding for equity

### Develop a needs-based ECEC funding model building from the SDP project

- Fund a national design process to build from SDP findings into a new needs-based ECEC funding model, incorporating equity loadings that align with integrated early years service delivery.

### Implement a dedicated supply-side funding model for ACCOs

- Implement a dedicated funding model for ACCOs that reflects the full cost of holistic service delivery, as detailed in the SNAICC report Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services.

### Implement a dedicated supply-side funding model for intensive ECEC models

- Prioritising locations with concentrations of young children who are at-risk and experiencing significant social disadvantage (modelling suggests need for 30-40 centres across Australia).



# Introduction

While universal ECEC is a critical foundation for Australian children, access to an early learning place is only one piece of the puzzle. What children and families need to thrive varies widely depending on their unique circumstances and the communities in which they live. However, to bridge the gap between universal ECEC and broader community supports, particularly for those experiencing disadvantage, we must rethink how services are delivered.

For those families experiencing disadvantage, Hubs and related integrated models bridge the gap between universal ECEC and broader family and community supports. They provide coordinated and trusted pathways that simplify access, reduce the burden of navigating complex systems, and respond to the underlying causes of vulnerability, not

just the symptoms. Embedding high-quality, integrated early years models where needed as part of Australia's core educational, health and social infrastructure can ensure all children, regardless of where they live or their background, can start school thriving.

## This paper outlines:

- The case for reform and practical steps for governments to align funding, governance and workforce policy around these proven models, delivering a cohesive, equitable and high-quality early years system that places children and families at its centre.
- The transformative potential of integrated early years models, including Hubs, ECEC Plus, Early Years Collaboration Models and intensive ECEC models.

## Definitions used in this document

- **Hubs:** The term Hubs refers to models of Child and Family Hubs that use high-quality early learning as a welcoming, non-stigmatising entry point for families. The Hubs term is applied broadly to include hubs co-located with ECEC centres or on school sites and hubs run by ACCOs where early learning is a key entry point for families.
- **Related integrated models:**
  - ◊ **ECEC Plus:** A model to enhance the current ECEC system by providing additional support to ECEC centres in lower socioeconomic communities.
  - ◊ **Early Years Collaboration Models:** Networked models of collaboration for smaller rural communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage.
  - ◊ **Intensive ECEC:** Highly intense and targeted interventions within the universal system. In communities with profound disadvantage, they provide a critical layer of support in addition to Hubs or ECEC Plus.

# Barriers to meeting children's needs in the current early years system

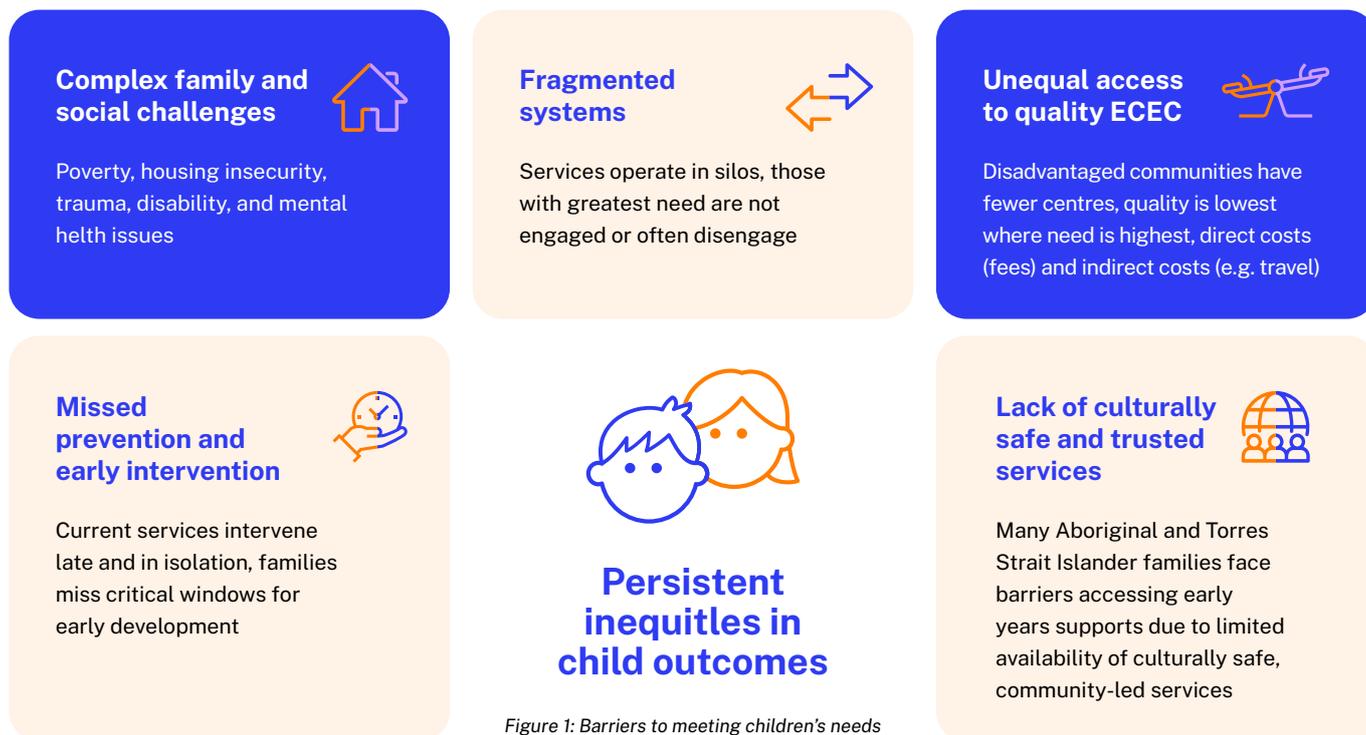


Figure 1: Barriers to meeting children's needs

## No one-size-fits-all solution

Because different models work best in different settings, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the complexity of children's needs. To demonstrate how these concepts can be practically applied across varying community contexts, this paper focuses on key integrated early years models:

- Hubs, including ACCOs
- ECEC Plus
- Early Years Collaboration Models
- Intensive ECEC models, like the Early Years Education Program (EYEP)

Crucially, these models also possess the proactive capacity to reach out and connect with isolated community members who may otherwise be cautious about engaging with

government or social services. Despite these distinct qualities and benefits, coverage is limited, funding is fragmented and short-term, and integration enablers are often unfunded. This undermines quality, reach and sustainability, especially in communities experiencing significant disadvantages.

By understanding the distinct functions and shared foundations of these models, policymakers are better positioned to design effective funding and regulatory environments. High-quality, integrated early years models should be designed into core educational, health and social infrastructure across Australia to ensure all children start school thriving, irrespective of their location or background.

# Addressing children’s needs through differentiated and proportionate early years models

Children’s early years needs vary greatly depending on their unique make up, including family context, circumstances, and community. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution. A range

of models are needed to meet families where they are, providing proportionate and locally tailored, targeted and holistic supports (see Figure 2).

## Increasing intensity of child vulnerability and program response



Figure 2: Different early childhood services models are needed to effectively support children and families' diverse needs

## Hub models

Across Australia there are more than 230 Child and Family Hubs with early learning as a front door and more than 470 Hubs in total (also including Hubs on health sites, broader community sites and virtual Hubs).<sup>xii</sup> Hubs act as both service centres and social anchors within communities, providing children and families access to:

- early learning (ECEC, playgroup, toy libraries)
- primary school
- child and family health nurses
- allied health professionals
- parenting programs and family support services
- playgroups and toy libraries
- informal spaces where families can meet, connect and build social networks.

### Responding to complexity and vulnerability

For families facing intersecting challenges, navigating fragmented social services can be overwhelming. Hubs respond to this complexity by providing coordinated, trusted pathways. Hubs facilitate collaboration between educators, health professionals, and community workers around the specific needs of each child. This allows the system to address the underlying causes of vulnerability, rather than merely treating its symptoms.

### Countering social isolation

Beyond service delivery, Hubs play a vital role in building community cohesion. Growing social isolation and loneliness among families with young children is a recognised threat to both parental wellbeing and early childhood

development. Hubs directly counter this trend by providing welcoming, relational, and informal spaces. They serve as trusted community environments where families can build social networks, seek advice early, and receive consistent, ongoing support.

### Hub impact

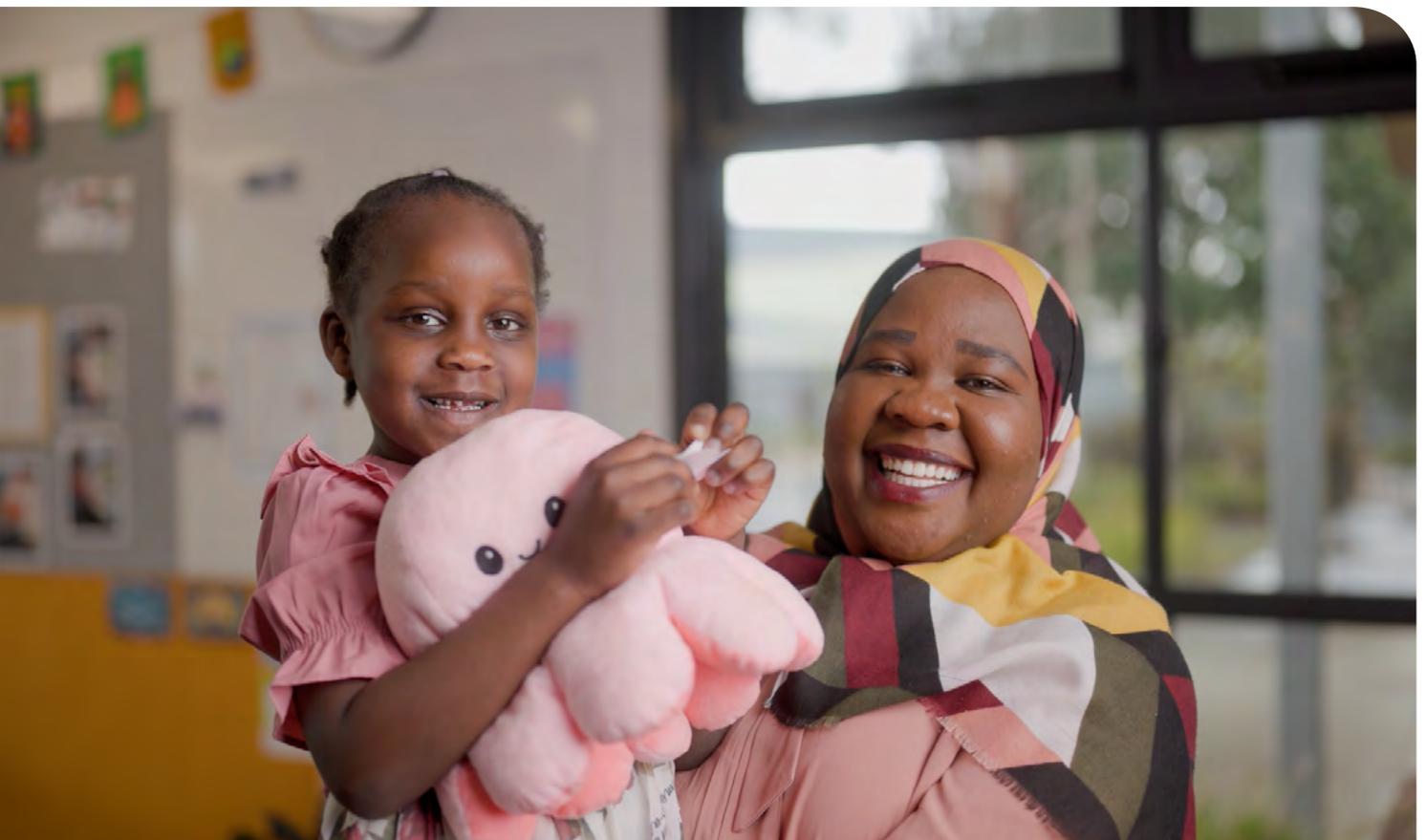
Evidence shows that Hubs enable earlier identification of developmental and safety concerns, strengthen protective relationships, and improve health, education, and family outcomes.<sup>xiv</sup> Evaluations demonstrate they can reduce child protection involvement, hospitalisations, and youth crime, alongside delivering a strong social return, with recent analyses showing up to \$3.50 in social benefits for every \$1 invested.<sup>xv</sup>

Hubs' focus on prevention and supporting families to navigate service systems increases the efficiencies of these investments. When families feel supported, they are less likely to miss appointments with medical professionals or government services, with Hub staff helping to coordinate attendance.<sup>xvi</sup> This reduces costs for governments both in terms of a reduction in no-show appointments and an increase in families benefiting from key services. An integrated approach also sees more effective collaboration between service providers, reducing duplication and closing support gaps.<sup>xvii</sup>

*I was carrying too much on my own, fleeing violent relationships and losing kids to the system. When I found out I was pregnant again, the fear was overwhelming, and I had low trust. Everything changed when I was introduced to the Hub and connected with a caseworker who stood beside me and really listened. The Hub felt safe, welcoming and non-judgemental. I received support for housing, Centrelink, counselling, and school needs. I kept my baby and regained my confidence. Through women's groups and new friendships, I finally felt less alone. The Hub gave me the stepping stones to rebuild my family and life.*

Mother attending a Hub <sup>xviii</sup>

Research has identified **over 25,400 children** experiencing significant disadvantage living across 131 communities that sit at the nexus of high early childhood disadvantage and a lack of ECEC services (childcare deserts). These communities should be prioritised for urgent investment in Hubs.



## ECEC Plus model

ECEC Plus is a model to enhance the current ECEC system by providing additional support to centres in lower socioeconomic communities. These centres often support more children and families facing complex challenges, including:

- greater learning inequities
- significant barriers to participation
- limited access to other early years supports.<sup>xx</sup>

ECEC Plus addresses these challenges, helping to better meet children's diverse needs, by investing in:

- increased staffing ratio and skill mix above minimum standard
- professional learning, reflection and supervision
- leadership and management support
- outreach to families and
- wrap-around services across health, child development and family supports.<sup>xxi</sup>

SVA's [Targeting Investment Where it Counts](#) report identifies more than 520 communities that are not in childcare deserts but struggle to meet the needs of children experiencing high early childhood and social disadvantage. In these communities, a combination of tailored, high-quality models of support like ECEC Plus, Hubs (including ACCOs) and intensive ECEC models are needed to better respond to community needs. Where appropriate, existing ECEC services could be supported to offer an enhanced ECEC Plus model for children.

## ACCOs

Across communities, many children with high levels of early childhood disadvantage are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and will require an ACCO. ACCOs play a key role in providing safe spaces for families to build cultural pride, confidence and resilience, and develop their children's strengths and skills. Although ACCOs have been included under the umbrella of Hubs, they require explicit mention because of their unique purpose and role, their commitment to shared decision making, self-determination, and cultural governance, in alignment with Closing the Gap Priority Reform One.<sup>xxiii</sup>

ACCOs are more successful than mainstream services in attracting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and meeting children's needs. By embedding cultural child-rearing practices within holistic, community-led models, they have been shown to achieve stronger developmental outcomes.<sup>xxiv</sup>

These services provide culturally safe and strengths-based engagement, and wraparound supports, that build trust and sustain participation, to:<sup>xxv</sup>

- enhance child development
- strengthen cultural identity
- promote wellbeing
- effectively address developmental vulnerability through early identification.

As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC's (National Voice for our Children) leadership is critical to achieving a strong, sustainable and self-determined early years system.

## Intensive ECEC model

Around two per cent of children in Australia require highly intensive support to develop on the same trajectory as their peers. Social Ventures Australia and Parkville Institute modelling indicates these specialised services are needed in approximately 40 communities across Australia. The leading Australian example is the Early Years Education Program (EYEP), a three-year, evidence-based model providing five hours of high-quality education and care per day, five days a week, for children enrolled between birth and the age of three.

Intensive ECEC is designed to support children who:

- are living with significant social disadvantage
- have experienced abuse, neglect and/or trauma and
- are engaged with the child protection system.

These models act as highly intense and targeted interventions within the universal system, akin to intensive care in the healthcare system. In communities with profound disadvantage, they provide a critical layer of support in addition to Hubs or ECEC Plus, supporting children until they are ready to transition into mainstream ECEC or school.

## Early childhood collaboration models

Smaller rural communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage require new networked models of collaboration, as market-based approaches are often unviable. . By bringing together government, providers, local councils, schools, health networks, and community organisations this model allows community leaders to:

- jointly plan, fund and sustain early years services, reflecting local needs
- coordinate planning and investment across sectors and jurisdictions, rather than relying on competition between providers
- create shared accountability for outcomes
- foster local innovation where traditional service models struggle to reach families.

# Recommendations for embedding hubs and related integrated models within Australia's early years system and beyond

Hubs and related integrated models are a key class of system infrastructure. They are essential for delivering early years reforms (including Thriving Kids), achieving Closing the Gap targets, and delivering community-led, place-based change to improve child and family wellbeing.

Despite strong evidence of impact, the availability of these models remains highly limited and fragile under current funding and policy settings. Their capacity to support communities is threatened by:

- short-term, fragmented, inadequate levels of funding
- restrictive grants
- a lack of support for integration and infrastructure maintenance.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Local-level integration can be constrained by fragmented governance, leadership, and funding from the top down. For these models to sustain and grow outcomes for children it is essential that integrated practices and processes are embedded throughout all levels of the system including:

- service delivery and practice
- funding
- commissioning
- policy, governance and leadership.

While the Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 commits the Federal Government to better coordination and integration of early years policy and programs, co-ordinated implementation of integration remains limited. A more deliberate, whole-of-federation approach is needed to translate this commitment into action. Making integration and quality the core features of the universal ECEC system requires leadership and reform across five domains:

1. Governance, accountability and system stewardship
2. Infrastructure and planning
3. Sector development and workforce capability
4. Integration
5. Reforming ECEC funding to reflect equity and true cost of quality

## 1. Governance and accountability

Embedding integration requires clear and shared accountability across the federal, state and territory governments. A joined-up governance framework should:

- define roles, responsibilities, and funding arrangements
- drive alignment across portfolios and jurisdictions
- ensure coherence with the Closing the Gap agenda and a national vision for child development.

Joined-up stewardship should support:

- collaborative planning, quality and safety monitoring, and outcome tracking across services
- alignment of objectives and measures
- a balance between national consistency and local innovation and community responsiveness.

### Recommendations and future work needed

#### Design a National Hubs and Related Integrated Models Plan

This plan needs to set out:

- how Hubs and related integrated early years models (ECEC Plus, intensive ECEC, and Early Childhood Collaboration Models) can support the Federal Government's early years reform agendas and
- the priorities needed to sustain scaled delivery.

#### Embed integration across government services and reforms

This should include measures like:

- elevating an integrated early childhood development system as a Prime Ministerial priority
- creating interdepartmental and intergovernmental governance structures to clarify roles and responsibilities, and develop shared objectives, KPIs, and outcomes measures across portfolios to incentivise and support more integrated service delivery, including Hubs and related integrated models, and
- streamlining application, implementation and reporting processes across key reforms so service providers that support children, and families can have efficient and less duplicative government engagement across portfolios.

## 2. Infrastructure and planning

Fit-for-purpose infrastructure supports effective integrated early years service delivery. Evidence highlights that well-designed, purpose-built, child-centred services are a key success factor. These facilities often include informal community spaces, shared staff areas, consulting rooms and spaces for play.

The Building Fund presents a major opportunity to invest in capital that enables

integration where needed by adding integration facilities to standard ECEC configurations and constructing purpose-built, multi-purpose, co-located centres using best practice inclusive design in priority locations. These facilities can bring education, health and family supports together in environments designed around the needs of children and families.

### Recommendations and future work needed

**Leverage capital investment through the Building Fund** Use the \$500m Building Fund allocation for Government built centres to deliver equity through purpose-built Hubs and related integrated models in communities of high early childhood disadvantage. This requires:

- capital expenditure for additional infrastructure to deliver a Hub (\$1.39M min, per the Building Fund site capital expenditure\*), and
- ongoing operational funding (including service delivery, repair and renovation of premises, cleaning, gardening, IT, local events, local outreach travel, printing etc.) attached to all new Building Fund-funded services (estimated \$160,000 p.a. per site recurrent operational funding). An expansion of the Community Child Care Fund program could support operational funding pending reform of ECEC funding model.

### Embed integration across government services and reforms

This should include measures like:

- elevating an integrated early childhood development system as a Prime Ministerial priority
- creating interdepartmental and intergovernmental governance structures to clarify roles and responsibilities, and develop shared objectives, KPIs, and outcomes measures across portfolios to incentivise and support more integrated service delivery, including Hubs and related integrated models, and
- streamlining application, implementation and reporting processes across key reforms so service providers that support children, and families can have efficient and less duplicative government engagement across portfolios.

\* 20% capital and operational loadings should be added for rural and remote settings. Indicative set up costs for a Hub including 60 ECEC places, based on a Hub in metropolitan New South Wales serving 100 families.<sup>xxx</sup>

### 3. Integration

Although the government invests substantially in the early childhood development system, inefficiencies, duplication and a failure to reach many children with the greatest need undermines this investment. Through a marginal investment in integration enablers there is a significant opportunity to unlock existing funding in the system to improve outcomes for children and families, expand the impact of government services and reduce long-term costs.

Integration enablers (the glue) encompass the relationships, people, systems, and backbone supports that hold services together. Shared purpose is needed to reduce complexity for families, meet their needs and improve outcomes for children. <sup>xxx</sup>

They include:

- coordination and integration roles
- shared systems (like common data platforms, referral pathways, shared case management tools and monitoring frameworks)
- local governance that brings education, health, and family supports together to sustain collaboration over time.

Many Hubs and related integrated models lack dedicated or recurrent funding for integration enablers, despite this being integral to effectiveness. Research shows that Hubs:

- with funded integration enablers secure significantly more partnered delivery services
- establish stronger governance structures
- can support higher levels of integration and deliver on average 22 times more value than those without dedicated integration funding<sup>xxxii</sup>.

This evidence demonstrates that integration is not self-sustaining; it requires deliberate and ongoing investment in the people, relationships and systems that hold services together and make collaboration work for families.

Dedicated funding for integration enablers ensures that integrated early years models can plan collectively, maintain trusted relationships with families, and deliver culturally safe and coordinated supports. <sup>xxxiii</sup>

For ACCOs, flexible integration funding must also resource culturally safe recruitment, workforce development and community-led cultural activities that build trust and connection.

*I was seven months pregnant, alone, and had nowhere to go – sleeping on the floor of a stranger’s home, then moving into crisis accommodation. The Hub caseworker came to the hospital where my baby was born, set up my room at the crisis accommodation, helping me to build trust at a time when I had very little left. The co-location of services is really helpful, they helped me navigate housing, Centrelink and early support for my son. With practical help, food from the Hub’s pantry, childcare, and regular check-ins, I gained stability and learnt to be a mum. Over time, I found my place in the community, through playgroups, volunteering, and fundraising. The hub gave me belonging, support, and the confidence to give back and build a future for my son.”*

Mother attending a Hub <sup>xxxiv</sup>

## Recommendations and future work needed

### Unlock existing funding in the system and expand service impact

- Provide flexible, but explicit, block funding, distributed as a grant for integration in Hubs in priority communities. This will help the existing system achieve its goals by reaching children who are not currently accessing services, ensuring greater uptake of services and avoiding duplication. This could start with an investment of \$112m per year (with additional loadings for higher cost settings) to support approximately 200 Hubs. It should evolve to new recurrent funding models (see below).

### Develop an Integration Implementation Framework to drive consistent national integration, quality, and improvement in integrated models including Hubs:

- Fund development of a set of lead indicators to guide quality implementation and improvement, including integration, family engagement and governance.

## 4. Sector development and integration workforce capability

Although the government invests in embedding integration in early years services, requires a workforce capable of delivering the relational work that overcomes structural issues embedded in the system,<sup>xxxv</sup> relying on a diverse mix of professionals including:

- educators
- allied health or mental health professionals
- family practitioners
- outreach and cultural engagement staff
- integration roles that act as ‘the glue’.

Adequate recognition and support, including funding, is essential to strengthening this workforce and its operation in practice. Staff in these settings combine education and therapeutic skills, supporting child development, learning and family wellbeing. Research has found that this highly skilled, multi-disciplinary workforce is critical to children’s rapid progress, particularly in language, cognitive skills, and socio-emotional development.<sup>xxxvi</sup> A workforce also needs multidisciplinary skills to enable high-quality integration across services, these skills need to be explicitly developed and included as a priority part of initial training.

This kind of workforce can only be sustained when supported by:

- a multidisciplinary team
- ongoing reflective supervision, and opportunities for reflective practice
- well-designed roles including lower child-to-staff ratios
- stable, consistent teams that can form deep relationships with children and families.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Persistent workforce shortages, particularly in regional and remote areas, are compounded by low pay, insecure conditions, and continued undervaluing of professions where most workers are female. These systemic issues contribute to high turnover, thin professional pipelines, and limited career progression.

The National ECEC Workforce Strategy 2021-2030: Shaping Our Future<sup>xxxviii</sup> and the Federal Government’s Early Childhood Education and Care Worker Retention Payment are important first steps. However, more is needed. Without further action, workforce gaps will continue to limit:

- the scale and quality of integrated and holistic service delivery
- the leadership models and training required for integrated multidisciplinary approaches.

### Recommendations and future work needed

**Support and grow a workforce with the skills to work in adaptive, multidisciplinary settings** Design a Thriving Kids Workforce Plan that grows the capacity of the current workforce and uses existing Hubs and related integrated models to demonstrate and innovate effective relational and multidisciplinary practice.

# Recommendations for reforming early years funding to enable Hubs and related integrated models

## 5. Reform ECEC funding for equity

### ECEC equity funding

The potential of ECEC to narrow disparities in development, learning and wellbeing<sup>xxxix</sup> in early childhood is not being realised because children living in socioeconomic disadvantage:

- do not have equitable access to high-quality ECEC
- face other structural barriers to access and participation including cost, transport, cultural or language differences, disability, and housing instability.<sup>xl</sup>

Families experiencing significant complexity are often cautious about engaging with services. It takes time to build trust and ultimately secure attendance and engagement with services. They are also more likely to need holistic, integrated supports from multiple services: not something standard ECEC can provide without additional resources.

Universal, accessible, and high-quality early learning is critical to underpin an effective, integrated early years service system. However, past inquiries have revealed that the current ECEC funding model has contradictory outcomes for equity of access and quality, particularly for disadvantaged communities.<sup>xli</sup>

This flawed funding structure creates significant barriers to integration by:

- not adequately resourcing equity and inclusions costs in ECEC funding models including the integration costs of supporting children with additional needs that require health and or other services
- undermining efforts to embed ECEC services within or alongside Hubs<sup>xlii</sup>
- leaving many existing Hubs without an ECEC component, despite recognition of its critical importance for child development and early intervention
- limiting the ability to establish new Hubs (including ACCOs), ECEC Plus, Early Years Collaboration Models and Intensive ECEC in areas of high need.

ECEC funding reforms defined by the SPD project, specifically unit pricing, could provide a critical opportunity to implement a needs-based funding model to embed equity, quality and sustainability in funding design. Other funding reforms, like Thriving Kids and DSS' families and children program reforms, should also incorporate adequate funding to support integrated models, including Hubs.

### ACCO funding

Research demonstrates that current funding approaches are not fit for purpose and are failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities.

While ACCOs aim to provide outreach and holistic supports that address barriers to

learning and development services access, funding is narrowly targeted and siloed. This hampers service delivery through high and complex funding management, reporting, resourcing, and delivery requirements, and limits the ability to establish new ACCOs in areas of high need.

To ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to have the best possible start in life, regardless of the circumstances, funding for ACCOs must be reformed to allow:

- core services that provide long-term stability
- flexible offerings that allow ACCOs to meet the specific needs of local communities.

### **Intensive models**

At the apex of the future universal ECEC system is a small cohort (around two per cent of children) requiring highly intensive support if they are to thrive, learn and develop on the same trajectory as their peers. These children are typically living

with significant social disadvantage and are at risk, having experienced abuse, neglect and/or trauma, and are engaged with child protection.

To redress the profound impacts of trauma, these children require an intensive, evidence-based model of ECEC, like the EYEP, to provide an enriched early learning and care environment.

Opportunities to provide further support to intensive models, in addition to the ECEC equity funding identified above, include:

- leveraging current reforms, like Thriving Kids and the DSS reform of programs for families and children
- recognising the significant impact and capacity for early intervention and avoiding downstream costs in specific Federal and state portfolios:
  - ◇ Federal social services
  - ◇ State-level community services, child protection, housing and homelessness, and youth justice.



## Recommendations and future work needed

### Develop a needs-based ECEC funding model, building from the SDP project

- Fund a national design process, building from SDP project findings, to develop a new needs-based ECEC funding model, incorporating equity loadings that align with integrated early years service delivery.
  - ◇ Loadings would reflect the complexity and needs of the children and families being supported, service intensity required, staffing, travel, community outreach and higher cost of delivery.
  - ◇ Design process to include Department of Education, Department of Social Services, Treasury, and peak bodies to deliver a revised national funding model which considers complementary funding reforms for children and families like Thriving Kids and DSS' families and children reforms.

### Implement a dedicated supply-side funding model for ACCOs

- Implement a dedicated funding model for ACCOs that reflects the full cost of holistic service delivery, as detailed in the SNAICC report Funding Model Options for ACCO Integrated Early Years Services.

### Implement a dedicated supply-side funding model for intensive ECEC models

- Prioritising locations with concentrations of young children who are at risk and experiencing significant social disadvantage (modelling suggests need for 30-40 centres across Australia).



# Conclusion: Seizing the opportunity for generational change

Australia stands at a critical juncture in early childhood reform. With the release of the Early Years Strategy 2024–2034, the \$1b Building Fund, and concurrent reviews across education, health, and social services, parliamentarians have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape how we support our youngest citizens.

However, as the evidence in this brief demonstrates, universal ECEC alone is insufficient to close the persistent equity gap. We cannot accept a status quo where **up to 27 per cent of children in some communities start school with significant developmental vulnerability.**

To ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive, we must move beyond fragmented, siloed service delivery. Hubs, alongside ECEC Plus, ACCOs, Early Years Collaboration Models, and Intensive ECEC models, offer a proven, scalable blueprint. By using early learning as a welcoming, non-stigmatising ‘front door’, these integrated models offer scaling services based on need, wrapping essential health, family, and community supports around the child. They reduce the burden on families navigating complex systems, intervene earlier, and deliver a compelling social return of **up to \$3.50 for every dollar invested.**

Realising this potential requires a paradigm shift: we must stop viewing Hubs and related integrated models as fragile, grant-dependent community projects and start recognising them as core, permanent national infrastructure. This transition demands bold leadership and targeted action to:

- **Establish a national plan:** Drive cross-portfolio and cross-jurisdictional alignment to embed Hubs and related integrated models into national policy.
- **Leverage capital infrastructure investments:** Use the Building Fund to construct purpose-built Hubs and related integrated models that co-locate services, rather than building standalone ECEC centres.
- **Fund integration, not just services:** Provide stable, long-term funding for the integration enablers (‘the glue’: the coordination, workforce capability, and shared systems) that make integration work on the ground.
- **Support and grow a workforce with the skills to work in adaptive, multidisciplinary settings**
- **Reform funding for equity:** Implement needs-based ECEC funding that enables provision of integrated early years models in areas of need, alongside dedicated, co-contributed funding models for ACCOs and Intensive ECEC services.

We have the evidence, successful models, and policy momentum. By embedding Hubs and related integrated models into the fabric of Australia’s infrastructure for the early years and beyond, we can turn policy intent into practical, life-changing realities for families. Acting now will reduce downstream crises, eliminate service duplication, and deliver an enduring legacy of equity and opportunity for Australia.

# More information

To discuss these recommendations further or to learn more about the impact of Hubs and related integrated models, we invite you to connect with us:

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