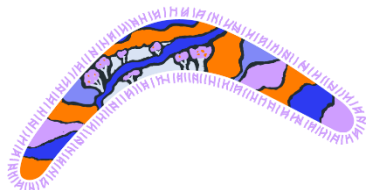




Designing the Thriving Kids initiative so it works for families

Lessons from integrated early
childhood hubs

7 August 2026



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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Introduction

State and territory governments are planning Thriving Kids¹ to provide children with additional developmental needs and their families with earlier, easier access to support in the places they live, learn and play. Governments have committed to a child-centred approach, with support matched to each child and family's needs. Early childhood hubs ('Hubs') share many of the same principles as Thriving Kids and already bring together services that Thriving Kids will need to connect with or deliver. They also support many children and families who may be part of Thriving Kids.

To support the design and delivery of Thriving Kids, Social Ventures Australia (SVA) has identified relevant lessons from our research on Hubs. These lessons recognise that Thriving Kids will build on existing early childhood services and set out practical ways to make the early childhood development system easier for families to access and navigate.

Families experiencing early childhood disadvantage often face overlapping challenges and a service system that is fragmented, siloed and hard to navigate. SVA and partners' research shows that integrated, wrap-around support can help reduce inequities for children and families with complex needs. Children have better outcomes when support is deliberate and joined up across governance, service coordination, workforce capability, professional learning and family experience.

Integration requires deliberate investment in the actions and conditions that enable services to coordinate, adapt to local contexts, and build strong relationships with children and families. This is especially important in communities where disadvantage and developmental vulnerability overlap.

Government departments designing Thriving Kids will need to build on existing early childhood services, add new supports where there are gaps, and make the system easier for families to access and navigate. Thriving Kids has the potential to reduce developmental inequity rather than entrench it further, but only if it is embedded across existing early childhood services and supported by adequate investment in integration.

Together, the lessons below focus on what governments can do to make Thriving Kids integrated, accessible and effective for children and families. They highlight where Thriving Kids can build on the experience of Hubs, where new investment is needed, and how implementation can streamline rather than add further complexity to an already fragmented system.

¹ Thriving Kids was announced in 2025 and will be delivered by Australian, state and territory governments. It will identify developmental concerns earlier and establish a national system of supports for children aged 8 and under with developmental delay and/or autism with low to moderate support needs, and their families. Australian Government. (2026) Thriving Kids fact sheet www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/thriving-kids-fact-sheet?language=en

Lesson 1: Establish Thriving Kids in trusted, integrated settings that work for children and families experiencing disadvantage.

Lesson 2: Design culturally responsive and context-specific models that reflect the needs, strengths and leadership of local communities.

Lesson 3: Invest in the Thriving Kids workforce, including service leaders and integration practitioners who can build relationships, connect services and close local system gaps.

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Lesson 5: Embed Thriving Kids within existing early childhood service systems, rather than creating another separate service stream.

Lesson 6: Fund the integration enablers that make coordinated delivery possible.

Lesson 7: Establish governance and authorising arrangements early, so partners can work across service boundaries.

Lesson 8: Use data on developmental vulnerability, disadvantage and service access to guide where investment and implementation support are most needed.



Lesson 1: Establish Thriving Kids in trusted, integrated settings that work for children and families experiencing disadvantage

Families trust Hubs because they provide non-judgemental and flexible support in a location that feels safe. Hubs build relationships with families, support navigation and reduce the need for families to repeat their story. Through one front door, families can access support for child development, parenting capability and community connection.²

This is particularly important in communities with higher early childhood disadvantage, where children have greater developmental vulnerability and families are more likely to interact with different service systems. Families with higher needs often miss out on support because of insufficient service and workforce availability, skill gaps, higher delivery costs and barriers such as affordability and transport.

Thriving Kids seeks to build family confidence and capability in supporting children's development, which requires strong relationships between families and services. Delivery must be relational, accessible and provided through existing trusted settings for families. Families should be supported by strong referral, navigation and co-location arrangements that connect developmental, allied health and family supports as part of one cohesive offer. Thriving Kids would benefit from adopting the 'no wrong door' approach used by Hubs, strengthening early access to support that meets families' needs.

Lesson 2: Design culturally responsive and context-specific models that reflect the needs, strengths and leadership of local communities

Support for children and families is more effective when integrated service delivery reflects cultural and contextual factors, rather than assuming a single model will work for all communities. The Boori Milumba Model shows that self-determination, Aboriginal governance, cultural authority and holistic family partnership are core design requirements for effective support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This needs to sit alongside practical enablers such as transport, reflective supervision, small group sizes and integrated family supports.³

For families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, culturally responsive design means more than providing translated information. Families may understand child development, disability and early intervention in different ways, or be unfamiliar with Australian service systems. Hubs show the value of bilingual and bicultural workers, interpreter-supported conversations, plain-song-language explanations and time to discuss support in culturally familiar and non-stigmatising ways.

For Thriving Kids, this means building culturally specific access pathways from the start. This includes dedicated First Nations-led pathways and culturally safe commissioning, as well as design

² Social Ventures Australia. (2025). *In their words: The power of Early Childhood Hubs: Understanding the lived experience of families who engage with Early Childhood Hubs around Australia*. https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/SVA-Early-Childhood-Hubs_Final-Report.pdf

³ Social Ventures Australia. (2024). *The Boori Milumba model: An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific service-led intensive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) model*. https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-Boori-Milumba-Model_20240912-1.pdf

features for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These features include interpreter use at intake and key appointments, plain-language information about child development and available supports, and partnerships with multicultural, settlement and community organisations. It also means adequate and sustained funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) integrated early years services to ensure First Nations-led delivery remains strong and high quality.

Local implementation should also test whether eligibility, referral and consent processes make sense across different languages and cultural contexts.

Lesson 3: Invest in the Thriving Kids workforce, including service leaders and integration practitioners who can build relationships, connect services and close local system gaps

Thriving Kids will depend on a strong, supported workforce that can work with children and families in relational, culturally safe and trauma-informed ways. This includes service providers, but also the leaders and integration practitioners who make coordinated delivery possible. Hubs show that integrated delivery relies on people with the time, skills and authorising environment to build trust with families, connect services, support multidisciplinary practice and respond to local gaps.

Integration practitioners are not a single profession. They include navigators, linkers, community facilitators, outreach workers, Hub leads. These and other roles help families navigate the complexity of multiple systems including developmental, allied health, early learning and family supports without falling through the gaps or having to retell their story. They need excellent relational skills, local knowledge, cultural capability and the confidence to work across service boundaries. They also need dedicated time to engage with families and other services, rather than being expected to add integration work on top of already full roles.⁴

Service leaders are equally important. Leaders in Hubs and other Thriving Kids delivery settings need the capability and capacity to create the conditions for integrated practice, support staff to work differently, and build partnerships across education, health, disability, family services and community organisations. This includes reflective supervision, professional learning, workforce wellbeing supports and practical mechanisms for staff to collaborate across disciplines.⁵

Thriving Kids requires investment in workforce development as core implementation infrastructure. This should include funding for integration roles, leadership capability, communities of practice, professional learning, reflective supervision and recruitment pathways that value relational skills and community knowledge. Without sustained workforce investment, Thriving Kids risks relying on individual goodwill and existing overstretched services, rather than building the workforce needed to deliver joined-up support for children and families.

⁴ Social Ventures Australia. (2024). *Integration in early years services: Learnings for impact*. <https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Integration-in-early-years-services-final-report-6.9.24.pdf>

⁵ *ibid*

Lesson 4: Learn from Hubs as experienced, ready settings to test, learn and adapt while Thriving Kids is progressively established

Established Hubs across Australia already have practical experience delivering relational, responsive and integrated support in different local contexts. They have existing relationships with families, service partners and communities, and can show how integrated delivery works in practice across different local conditions.

For Thriving Kids, Hubs' experience creates an opportunity to learn from settings that already help families access early support more easily and respond holistically to children's and parents' needs. Hubs can help governments understand early design questions, including how Thriving Kids should connect with existing services, what coordination is needed, how local partnerships should work, and where implementation is likely to reveal gaps between systems.

Hubs also provide practical settings to test and refine coordinated Thriving Kids approaches before broader rollout. This would allow governments to learn from real delivery environments, rather than creating a new model in isolation and only then testing how it works. Early learning through Hubs would help governments adapt Thriving Kids across communities with different levels of disadvantage, service access, workforce capacity and exposure to trauma.

Lesson 5: Embed Thriving Kids within existing early childhood service systems, rather than creating another separate service stream

Australia's early childhood service systems are complex, fragmented and often funded in silos. Many lack the governance and monitoring arrangements needed to support integrated practice on the ground. For families, this can mean delayed, fragmented or inappropriate support. For staff, it can mean more pressure and less capacity to coordinate. Hubs show that integration works best when families can move seamlessly between services.⁶

Thriving Kids will support children and families where they 'live, learn and play' across health, education, community and social service settings. This means Thriving Kids must be designed as new connective tissue that joins existing early childhood service systems, rather than becoming a new service stream.

Without this approach, we risk Thriving Kids becoming yet another stand-alone program within an already fragmented system, rather than making support easier to access. This means examining opportunities to streamline the governance, funding, coordination and infrastructure of our existing early childhood services so Thriving Kids can connect seamlessly. It also requires simple entry pathways, strong navigation functions and coordinated referral processes that connect supports.⁷

⁶ Social Ventures Australia. (2026). *Putting children at the centre: Embedding Hubs and related integrated models in our early years system and beyond*. https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/SVA_Putting-Children-at-the-Centre_24March2026.pdf

⁷ Ibid

Lesson 6: Fund the integration enablers that make coordinated delivery possible

Integrated delivery depends on deliberate investment in the enabling conditions that hold services together. Our research finds that the relational, governance and coordination functions of integration are critical for impact, but are often overlooked or underfunded.

These integration enablers, sometimes described as ‘glue’, include shared governance, coordination infrastructure, cross-sector leadership, referral pathways, data sharing, workforce capability and time for services to collaborate (see Box 1). Investment in integration enablers is non-negotiable for integrated initiatives to achieve their aims. In fact, Hubs with funded ‘glue’ deliver, on average, 22 times more dollar value in partnered delivery services than those without.⁸

For Thriving Kids, funded ‘glue’ should be visible in the model as dedicated roles, staff and workers’ time and operating infrastructure that enable services to work as one connected system. This includes funding for local leadership and backbone functions, administration and partnership coordination, shared intake and referral processes, multidisciplinary meetings, family navigation, community engagement, data sharing arrangements, and continuous learning. These functions should not rely on individual goodwill or be absorbed into existing service delivery budgets. They need to be explicitly commissioned, costed and accountable as part of the Thriving Kids delivery model, because the relational work required to overcome structural silos takes time, skill and sustained authorisation.



⁸ Social Ventures Australia. (2025) *From vision to viability: Funding requirements for effective Early Childhood Hubs*.
<https://www.socialventures.org.au/about/publications/from-vision-to-viability-funding-requirements-for-effective-early-childhood-hubs/>

Box 1. Conditions for integration from *Sticking points: Why the glue helps Early Childhood Hubs thrive*

Across communities, conditions for integration consistently centre around key domains:

1. **Relational infrastructure:** Trusted individuals who build strong relationships between families, services and partners, such as community facilitators, navigators and linkers. These relationships are vital for building understanding across cultural backgrounds and service contexts. Just as important is a trauma-informed workforce with capabilities such as emotional intelligence, cultural competence and collaboration skills needed to work across sectors. Ongoing training and time for relationship-building are essential to support this capability.
2. **Cross-sector governance and distributed leadership:** Governance structures and leadership at senior and operational levels that align services to a shared vision. This includes authorising environments that enable collaboration, distribute leadership across sectors and services, and drive accountability for integrated outcomes.
3. **Coordination systems and backbone infrastructure:** Operational systems and processes that enable collaboration, including shared data platforms, integrated referral processes and IT platforms, and joint case management (respecting client confidentiality). This includes both the digital and organisational infrastructure needed to hold integration together.
4. **Physical and place-focused design:** Physical design features that optimise access for families and collaboration for services – including single points of entry, co-located services, shared spaces such as staff rooms, and accessible, inclusive, culturally safe environments. Design should also be responsive to community needs and context.
5. **Collective care and accountability:** Shared culture of responsibility and collaborative ways of working for child and family outcomes, supported by inclusive governance, cultural safety, and mechanisms to embed family and community voices in service design and delivery. This also includes feedback loops and community-led decision-making.

Funding models also need to reflect the real cost of integration, rather than expecting providers to absorb it through existing service funding. ECEC Plus⁹ reinforces that universal access alone is not enough in communities facing concentrated disadvantage, where services may need enhanced staffing, capability, family engagement and wrap-around supports to identify and support children earlier. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) providers in communities with high early childhood disadvantage are stretched, with limited funding mechanisms to match the higher cost of delivery in these areas. Any further expectations on ECEC providers to meaningfully engage with Thriving Kids requires adequate resourcing.

For Thriving Kids, procurement and funding should treat integration as a core delivery requirement, not an optional add-on. Funding should include additional loadings for disadvantage, rurality and complexity where needed, especially in communities with higher socioeconomic vulnerability where service delivery is more complex and the cost of equitable access is often higher.



⁹ ECEC Plus is a potential model of enhanced ECEC designed to support children and families who face early childhood disadvantage by building on the current ECEC system to enhance support for staff, leaders and partnerships with families and other early years services. Social Ventures Australia. (2025). *ECEC Plus: A model to embed equity in the Early Childhood Education and Care system*. <https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/ECEC-plus-a-model-to-embed-equity-in-the-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-system.pdf>

Lesson 7: Establish governance and authorising arrangements early, so partners can work across service boundaries

Strong governance supported by dedicated integration enablers helps align partners around a common purpose, engage decision-makers in addressing systemic barriers, and create feedback loops between community, practitioners and system leaders. Successful initiatives prioritise relationship-building, community voice and shared accountability over formal structures alone, with governance acting as the foundation for trust, adaptation and sustained collaboration.¹⁰

For Thriving Kids, governance cannot be treated as a later implementation detail. Governments should establish cross-portfolio governance from the start, with clear roles for health, education, disability, family services, ACCOs, local services and communities. Governance should authorise collaboration across existing service boundaries, clarify decision-making and accountability, and provide practical ways to resolve barriers as they emerge.

Government planning should also build in local implementation structures that connect system-level decisions with place-based delivery. This includes shared outcomes, agreed referral and navigation pathways, data-sharing arrangements, commissioning settings that support collaboration, and feedback loops from families and practitioners. Planning for Thriving Kids should therefore focus not only on what services are funded, but on who is authorised to coordinate them, how partners will work together, and how governments will respond when local implementation reveals gaps in the broader system.

Lesson 8: Use data on developmental vulnerability, disadvantage and service access to guide where investment and implementation support are most needed

Thriving Kids is intended to support children experiencing developmental vulnerability and their families to access help earlier and more easily. Children in communities with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage are more likely to start school developmentally vulnerable, and families in these communities are more likely to face barriers to accessing the right supports early.

This means Thriving Kids implementation should be informed by data on developmental vulnerability, socioeconomic disadvantage and service access. Used together, this data provides insight to help governments identify communities where earlier, more coordinated support is most needed, and where investment is likely to have the greatest impact. SVA's work on priority investment shows that communities can be identified by combining data on disadvantage and developmental vulnerability.

ECEC Plus points to a related issue, highlighting a gap in systemic, equity-based funding for ECEC, meaning services supporting more children with higher needs often cannot access the additional support required for enhanced delivery.¹¹ For Thriving Kids, this points to the value of

¹⁰ Social Ventures Australia. (2024). *Integration in early years services: Learnings for impact*. <https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Integration-in-early-years-services-final-report-6.9.24.pdf>

¹¹ Social Ventures Australia. (2025). *ECEC Plus: A model to embed equity in the Early Childhood Education and Care system*. <https://www.socialventures.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/ECEC-plus-a-model-to-embed-equity-in-the-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-system.pdf>

considering where enhanced multidisciplinary supports may be needed most, particularly in communities where disadvantage, developmental vulnerability and service gaps overlap. This could include readiness and capability uplift for ECEC services, stronger outreach and family engagement functions, and practical support to help services participate effectively in Thriving Kids delivery.

A data-informed approach is necessary for effective rollout, infrastructure planning, workforce allocation and implementation support, rather than applying the same model across very different local contexts. This would help Thriving Kids provide more proportionate support in communities with greater need, while enabling local adaptation led by community evidence, service experience and family voice.

Conclusion

These lessons provide a starting point for applying SVA's early childhood research to the design and implementation of Thriving Kids. SVA would welcome the opportunity to support governments and partners to further explore the evidence, test how it applies in different delivery contexts, and identify practical steps to build integration, workforce capability, governance and targeted investment into Thriving Kids from the start.

Ultimately, Thriving Kids will be judged not by the number of services it creates, but by whether it makes support for children and families easier to access. The experience of Hubs suggests this requires governments to focus as much on the architecture of integration as on the services themselves. Getting this right from the outset offers a rare opportunity to strengthen the broader early childhood system while improving outcomes for children experiencing developmental vulnerability.

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