



# Early Years PATHWAYS

– positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

## A 10 year plan for integrated child and family services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

The program would:

- support demonstrated evidence based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services currently funded under the Budget Based Funding (BBF) program;
- support the 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Family Centres (ACFCs); and
- establish at least 40 new services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities every three years.

## WHY INVEST IN *Early Years PATHWAYS*?

**FIRST**, evidence clearly demonstrates that the early years of a child's life are a critical predictor of transition to school, as well as future education, health, development and wellbeing outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Long term randomised trials show particular benefit from age zero to three.

**SECONDLY**, where they exist, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and family services are a bedrock of their community. These services are a community development engine that nurture and protect children, and support families to raise their children strong, healthy and proud of who they are. There are also significant 'flow-on' impacts of such services in Indigenous communities to local workforce development, local governance, leadership, family strengths and stability, health and community empowerment.

**THIRDLY**, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face persistent disadvantage as a result of a variety of historical and ongoing factors. As a consequence, children consistently achieve lower educational, health and wellbeing outcomes. This is exemplified by the 2012 Australian Early Development Index findings that 43.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally vulnerable, twice the rate of non-Indigenous children. This means nearly half Indigenous children EVERY year are developmentally vulnerable. This has significant ongoing consequences for education, health, child protection, justice, welfare, housing and employment.

**FOURTH**, integrated early childhood development programs hold great potential for change. Environments that encourage and support optimal early childhood development greatly increase the likelihood of a successful transition to school; positive learning outcomes at school; and enhanced education, employment and health (Australian Early Development Index, 2012). Evidence also confirms that engagement in early childhood education and support reduces risk of harm to a child, and subsequent involvement with statutory child protection authorities, as well as reductions in remedial services and criminal behavior in the longer term.

"There is ... compelling international evidence about the returns on investment in early childhood services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including the work of Nobel Laureate James Heckman"

(Council of Australian Governments) (2009) National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

# The time for action is now.

A crisis – or opportunity – looms with National Partnership Agreement funding ending in June 2014 and a review of the BBF program underway. With minimal investment, this proposal enables the Government to significantly advance its Closing the Gap agenda to see Indigenous children across the country, physically, emotionally and developmentally ready for the challenge of school.



## THE NEED FOR CHANGE

The Budget Based Funding program is dramatically under resourced and is beyond capacity. The \$63 million annual BBF program commitment to support non-mainstream early years development compared with the \$6 billion spending on mainstream early childhood education and care, is clearly inadequate. This equates to around \$178,000 per service, in comparison to an operating budget of \$800,000 to \$1,000,000 for a 40-place long day care centre in a major city (with parent fees).

This has implications for: attracting and maintaining qualified staff and appropriate infrastructure; number of children the services can support; ability to service the high percentage of additional needs children; and the provision of the essential programs within

the community. The program is now under review, with services provided one year further funding until June 2014.

One-off funding was provided in 2009 under the National Partnership Agreement for Indigenous Early Childhood Development, 2008, (NPAIECD) to start to redress the dearth of services for children in Indigenous communities. This funding ends in June 2014, and the 38 integrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Family Centres developed will likely be moved to the mainstream funding model. This is despite a Government report recently confirming that this is not a feasible option.

There is a clear need for holistic, community controlled early childhood development services that prioritise

those children most in need. Programs and services focused on strengths-based, quality, culturally appropriate programs can make change happen.

The evidence for change is clearly supported by the national policy framework. The National Indigenous Reform Agenda, 2008, along with a series of other early years instruments, provide a clear principled basis for a holistic, integrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years program that is driven by parents and communities, adequately resourced over time, and accessible (physically and culturally) to communities.

What is missing is an appropriate program for implementation of the national policy framework.

## PROPOSED MODEL

More detailed information is contained in D. Brennan (2013) *Joining the Dots, Program and Funding Options for Integrated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's services*.

The program would be based on clear and principled program criteria and a new program objective.

It would support only evidence based education and care models with clear indicators for outcomes for children. This includes playgroups, mobile services or long day care centres, based on capacity and needs of the local community, as well as integrated service support to children and families. Integrated services include: health; additional needs; parenting skills; family outreach; transition to school;

counseling; family violence; drug and alcohol support; and related programs.

Consultations with services and review of the evidence suggests a tripartite funding structure, with:

- \$10,000 per child (the same of maximum Child Care Benefit in mainstream services) to be allocated based on the number of children attending the service;
- 5% raised by services, whether through fees, in-kind support, fundraising or rebate; and
- Foundation funding for critical integrated service supports and workforce development needs.

"I don't think we've ever thought this place is about strengthening just children, this place is about building a stronger community."

Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre



For more information contact Frank Hytten or Emma Sydenham on 03 9489 8099 or visit

[www.snaicc.org.au](http://www.snaicc.org.au)

"The BBFs and ACFCs are bedrock services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families around Australia. They deliver services in flexible, locally determined ways that match community needs and build on community strengths ... they have tremendous potential to help 'close the gap' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children." Brennan, D (2013)

# Bringing the services to life!

## Wynbring Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS)

Whyalla Stuart, South Australia

In the past year, 74 children were enrolled at Wynbring Jida MACS, with 70% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Wynbring Jida employs 10 Aboriginal staff, with four new or returning into the workforce.

Wynbring Jida offers long day care, as well as a Lets Read and Think Feet First program. Previously, there was a bus service to support families, however due to financial constraints this is no longer operating. Wynbring Jida work closely with Nunyara Aboriginal Health Service to support families with immunisations, maternal and child health checks, and any areas of development of concern. In the past year, approximately 24 children participated in these checks. Wynbring Jida also refers families to other specialist support, like speech therapy.

*We are a valuable part of the community, we provide a service that employs local Aboriginal people, and are an advocate for the families that we serve*

In the past year:

- 9 children have additional needs, including visual impairment, language/speech and physical delays;
- 8 children have been referred to the special care unit for additional support;
- 6 children have been referred for speech therapy;
- 2 children have been referred to occupational therapy;
- 1 family to grief counselling;
- 3 families to financial support;
- 4 families to respite care;
- 4 mothers to maternal care;
- 8 families have been provided with housing support;
- 5 children were involved in an out of home care placement; and
- 10 child protection notifications were made.

Wynbring Jida is the longest community-run Aboriginal service in Whyalla Stuart. It is a respected and valued part of the community, which is imperative to relationships with families. Current funding does not cover basic costs of service operation, nor the development of new needed programs at the centre.

# Yappera Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS)

Melbourne, Vic

In 2012, 74 children, all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, were enrolled at Yappera. 12 staff are Aboriginal, with one quarter new to the workforce or returning to the workforce.

Yappera runs a range of childcare programs, including: long day care; early start (family grouping); early start and preschool kindergartens; and two school holiday programs. The kindergarten programs have a pick up and drop off service, and 11 new families have joined the service through outreach. Nutrition, physical activity, drama, science, cultural, traditional dance, and parenting/carer programs and workshops are also offered at no additional cost.

In the past year,

- 58 children have participated in health checks, including audiology, optometry, paediatric assessments, dental, immunisations, and general health checks.
- Specialist health services have also been sourced for children, namely speech therapy, occupational therapy and cognitive/developmental support.
- several children with additional needs, including language/speech delays, cognitive delays, social/emotional delays and Autism spectrum disorder, have received additional support.
- 12 children were identified as requiring further assessment;

- 9 referrals were made for families to services including specialist children's services, counselling, family violence support, maternal care and health,
- 13 children have child protection involvement and 7 were in an out of home care placement.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture underpins all program planning, delivery and learning at Yappera, in recognition that children learn best with a strong connection to culture and robust support network of family and community. Family are considered to be the primary educators of children and with 50% of staff being local Aboriginal community members, a sense of trust between families and the service underpins its strong outcomes.

Every year, Yappera experiences significant budget gaps between received grants and projected expenditure.

In the 2012/2013 financial year, DEEWR funding received was \$615,0590. Projected salaries alone for this period were \$698,894. Yappera has raised fees, however the collection rate is only 50 – 70%. Despite fees, \$9500 fundraising monies and DEEWR wage incentives, a huge budget shortfall remains.

## Bubup Wilam Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Family Centre

Thomastown, Victoria

Its location was selected on the basis of the area having a high proportion of Aboriginal population and high levels of disadvantage. Prior to its inception many Aboriginal families and children were not accessing mainstream early education and care services. Families reported feeling isolated and frustrated at the lack of appropriate services available.

At Bubup Wilam, culture underpins every aspect of program planning and service delivery. The centre is much more than a long day care provider- it is a central community meeting place, where Aboriginal community members come together and where families can have multiple needs met in one place. In this way, the centre has helped to foster many community and social networks. Bubup Wilam's positive impact is evidenced by the increase in the number of Aboriginal children attending school in the area, as well as an increase in Aboriginal employment opportunities and participation in social and sporting activities. In 2013, the centre underwent a National Quality Standards (NQS) assessment and achieved great results: it met or exceeded all NQS standards and quality areas, with rating of exceeding NQS in two quality areas.

In the past year, 58 Aboriginal Children have attended Bubup Wilam. Of the 26 staff members employed at Bubup Wilam, 55 % are Aboriginal. It provides strong and supported pathways for staff professional advancement through its connection with the TAFE sector. The range of programs and services available at Bubup Wilam include but are not limited to, an early learning program, health checks, nutrition and family support services and community events and activities.

The estimated negative impact of transitioning to CCB funding is significant for Bubup Wilam. The centre has calculated that if fees were kept at a level that enables families most in need to attend, the annual deficit would be \$500,000. As a CFC, the service is required to offer an active range of services that are responsive to community need. Without the extra \$500,000 each year, Bubup Wilam will be forced to cut back on staff or programs, both of which will impact negatively on the children, families and broader community as a whole.