


# MAARI MA HEALTH ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

## Intensive Supported Playgroups





## Doing It Our Way – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led early intervention program

From 2020 to 2021, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children identified good practices of early intervention and family support programs that are being delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations across the nation.

This is one of 11 profiles that demonstrates how community-controlled organisations are achieving positive results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, including supporting these children to be kept safe from harm, uphold their right to grow up within their own family and community, and access critical health and early education services.

**Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation**  
**Intensive Supported Playgroups**  
**Broken Hill and Wilcannia, New South Wales**

### ACRONYMS

**ECE** early childhood education  
**ECEC** early childhood education and care



## OVERVIEW

The Intensive Supported Playgroups program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 years is a central part of Maari Ma's Early Years Program. At its core, the playgroups program focuses on providing a culturally safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in which their needs can be addressed. The families are also supported in this time and place to break down those barriers preventing them from accessing early childhood education (ECE) and health services. The program aims to prepare children for preschool and school, offering them the opportunity to play, learn and build relationships that will improve the quality of their lives, establish familiarity with literacy and numeracy, and orient children and their families towards culturally safe local preschools.

Delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the Broken Hill and Wilcannia regions of New South Wales, some of the key strengths of this program are that it is run by an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation, is delivered by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who undertake significant efforts to engage local families, and prioritises the development of trusting relationships between staff, children, and families. It also forms part of Maari Ma's integrated holistic approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healthcare, creating a soft entry point for families to take control of their health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

*"[My child] didn't know how to play with kids or talk to them – he had no social skills.*

*What Maari Ma playgroup did for [him], it built him up, really built him up"*

Playgroup parent



## THE PROGRAM

The Maari Ma playgroups program consists of planned and supported play-based sessions for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, delivered by Maari Ma Early Years Program staff in two far-west New South Wales locations. The Broken Hill site holds a playgroup once a week during the school term while the Wilcannia playgroup takes place three times a week during school terms. Both sites run sessions for up to two and a half hours. Parents and children alike thrive on the routine and structure of this program and, with parents and carers recognised as children's first teachers, they are encouraged to sit down with their child and participate.

As expressed in Maari Ma's 2009 Strategic Framework, the program was developed by the organisation recognising "the importance of play as a strategy in building relationships between very young children and their parents, and as a foundation for literacy."<sup>2</sup> Maari Ma considers early childhood to be a time of rapid growth and development, faster than any other time of life, and so the organisation sets out to "optimise the development of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families from pregnancy to school entry" by developing and implementing programs that will establish "the foundations for a child's future development, health, learning and social well-being."<sup>3</sup>

*"These early experiences set the stage for later success in school, adolescence and adulthood. Early intervention improves outcomes across a range of physical, emotional and social (including educational) indicators that have a positive effect throughout the life span"*

Maari Ma Strategic Framework 2009

The sessions have been consciously constructed to be age-, developmentally and culturally appropriate, developed through the collaboration of Maari Ma Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and non-Indigenous ECE-trained staff. Each program facet aims to be respectful and supportive of the participating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and the roles that these families play in raising strong and healthy children.

Right from the welcoming song, program sessions incorporate a variety of activities based on developmental play, singing, storytelling, and reading. With an aim to develop positive and respectful relationships, parents and other caregivers are expected to attend and be part of the activities, providing Maari Ma staff with the opportunity to model appropriate interactions with the children.

Group Time, in particular, is an essential program component that provides staff with the opportunity to educate parents about the importance of language and literacy, while the program also finds ways to expose parents and carers to developmental language. Through learning stories, staff build up parents' understanding of this 'language', and parents and carers report that they feel proud when they see themselves as competent and capable teachers in a learning story.

Another Maari Ma program, Little Kids and Books, is delivered in the playgroup sessions on a fortnightly basis. In this component, a high-quality children's book is introduced, each child is gifted a copy to take home, and children work through related activities, such as songs or guided play. In gifting children with a book every fortnight, the organisation is encouraging children and their families to read at home and develop home libraries.

*"Reading to children is one of the ways they learn about communication. Improved communication leads to enhanced health and educational outcomes. Reading is an important way to encourage a range of important skills, such as talking and understanding language, imagination, concentration, creativity, listening and problem solving"*

Maari Ma 2014 health report<sup>4</sup>

Staff also are underway with developing Maari Ma's own dialogic book-sharing program. This program uses wordless books, allowing parents to learn how to interact with their child around what they observe on each page. This has particular value for parents who struggle with their own literacy skills and hesitation around books.

The program also provides healthy nutritious meals at each group to encourage attendance and healthy eating, while the playgroups are purposefully held in welcoming homelike spaces. This results in families

intermingling with each other and Maari Ma staff in an informal relaxed setting where the primary focus is on achieving best outcomes for the children. Program staff rely on their connections within communities to be cognisant of any community disputes in order to neutralise these before they disrupt the space, as the program is intent on offering a space of neutrality and non-judgement to all attending families.

When families have left the centres at the end of the day, staff debrief about that day's session and activities. This has been recognised in a recent Early Years Program evaluation as an important opportunity for staff development,<sup>5</sup> and for providing the team with a dedicated time to discuss the complex circumstances faced by these children and their families, including what referrals and follow ups the staff could organise and from which the families may benefit.

Program staff consider the program to be a soft entry point into all the other services that Maari Ma offers. Knowing that every parent wants the best for their children, the organisation uses this child-focused education angle to encourage families into the Maari Ma setting and to build parents' confidence to go on to access health supports. Health staff have also been integrated into the playgroup's activities, including a child and family nurse, midwife, health practitioner, dietitian, mental health worker, social worker, speech pathologist, allied health assistant and dental assistant. These staff make themselves available during the playgroup time to advise and assist parents and caregivers, as well as support families to make appointments and referrals to other Maari Ma services if needed.

When Maari Ma staff realised that information demonstrations by the healthcare staff were not leading to the level of community engagement they were seeking, staff tried a more integrated approach, creating informal opportunities where healthcare staff could build relationships with children and families. The staff would get into the sandpits with children, build casual relationships with families, and then raise discussions about healthcare. This provided families with the opportunity "just to have sideways conversations about issues important to those families – [healthcare staff can] say, 'we can make an appointment, can come with you to the appointment, can pick you up and drop you off etc.'"<sup>6</sup> This has proved particularly beneficial for those families who may be scared to go to the clinic and/or have had negative experiences with mainstream services.

*"I engage with them, sit, talk and walk with them, try and understand what is actually going on in your life. They don't need to tell me everything, just tell me a little bit. It's about the trust"*

Intensive Supported Playgroup  
project officer



## BUILDING TRUST

Fundamental to the program's achievements is the relationships of trust that both playgroup staff and the broader Maari Ma organisation have established with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In knowing that the sessions are being run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, families feel comfortable and safe to attend playgroups and be advised on how to address some of the challenges they are facing in life, particularly around health and education. Many playgroup participants report that with Maari Ma, they feel like they have a voice, they can express themselves and they can give their feedback and opinions, something which they do not often feel comfortable doing in mainstream non-Indigenous organisations.

At the same time, as most of the staff come from the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, they already know most community members as well as what these members may require and how best to engage with each community and family. Both the program's early years support worker and the community engagement officer go into program communities to engage new and existing families through home visits and encourage them to bring their young children and themselves to each week's playgroup.

These staff members recognise that their existing role in the community, as well as consistency and persistence, are essential to the success of this engagement.

*"Engages, engages, engages, home visits all the time, that's how we really get the results we do"*

Intensive Supported Playgroup staff member

*"It may take 10 or 20 home visits before they actually attend, but I just keep going back. I think this is the reason we have such high numbers at playgroup"*

Intensive Supported Playgroup community engagement officer

*"I have a good connection with all the Indigenous people in the community. [I was] born and bred here. That's how you make the connection. [It's] not what you know, it's who you know, that's how you get those kids in"*

Intensive Supported Playgroup staff member





## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A key means to build this trust – and as a follow-on element of program success – is this intensive community engagement undertaken by the program's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Throughout each week, they maintain contact with families, conduct home visits, arrange transport to encourage families' attendance at playgroup sessions, and link families and children to other health services within and outside of Maari Ma. They also advocate for and emphasise to families the importance of early years and preschool attendance.

The program is considered to play a major role in breaking down those barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in enrolling in and attending preschools. The high level of trust and comfort established during these playgroup sessions is critical to the program maintaining this role, with community members feeling comfortable in approaching and being advised by those playgroup workers who they already know. In turn, the staff help participating families to enrol their children in preschool and provide support for children's continued attendance. One of the playgroup activities is an excursion by bus to visit local preschools so that families can see what these are like and what will be involved. For many of these families, this is their first time visiting a preschool.

Playgroup staff note the high degree of misconceptions and distrust that many parents and carers have about preschools. Again, relying on these relationships of trust and familiarity and through intensive engagement with families, the staff are able to clarify and breakdown misconceptions. Staff note that some families have said that their children cannot go to preschool because: the child is not toilet trained; the family does not have access to transport; or the parent had a negative experience with someone on the phone when they were enquiring about the preschool. Maari Ma staff listen with empathy, and then help families to overcome these barriers by organising transport for families to view preschools, supporting families to complete the enrolment process, and/or arranging a bus service for playgroup children to be transported to the preschool once they are enrolled.

*"One of our strong points is the amount of preschool enrolments we support – so many families wouldn't enrol in preschool if they didn't have the support of Maari Ma"*

Early Years Program leader

## COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT

Established in 1995, Maari Ma Aboriginal Corporation is a regional Aboriginal community-controlled health service based in Broken Hill, New South Wales. It provides a range of health and wellbeing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including the remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of Broken Hill, Wilcannia, Menindee, Ivanhoe and Balranald across almost 200,000 km<sup>2</sup> of far-western New South Wales. 2016 Census figures show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up about 10% of the region's population of approximately 30,000 people, with approximately 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5.<sup>7</sup>

The organisation's membership is made up of people from the seven communities in the region. It is led and governed by an all-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander board of directors, who are democratically elected and represent each of these seven communities.

*"The board is deeply committed to providing a holistic approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health that includes physical, emotional, spiritual, cultural and environmental dimensions".<sup>8</sup>*

Maari Ma website

Of the organisation's 130 employees, 70% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; with all being closely involved in the development, planning and delivery of Maari Ma programs, including the Early Years Program.

*"We deliver services to Aboriginal people and their families, and work closely with mainstream agencies to provide access to a broad range of services. Since our incorporation, Maari Ma has built strong local strategic partnerships. Maari Ma also strives to build and nurture partnerships with our communities as their participation in the planning and implementation of health and social programs is essential not only to quality health care but also to the integration of public health programs in our communities and improved community well-being"*<sup>9</sup>

Maari Ma website

The Maari Ma 2009 Strategic Framework reflects the organisation's ongoing commitment to working in partnership with the community to produce improved child development and wellbeing outcomes and to encourage healthy living, create health-promoting environments, and increase the capacity of communities to plan and direct their own services.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it began its Early Years Program "to address factors that affect health and wellbeing across the life course of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the region. Since that time, the Early Years Program has grown to encompass several programs delivered in multiple locations across the region, one of which is the Intensive Supported Playgroups program"<sup>11</sup> – refer to Table 1.

In contrast to many remote area programs, the Early Years Program leadership has been stable, with there being only two team leaders over the last 10 years. This has also enabled strong relationships to develop between community members and program staff.

Foundational to the program's community involvement and ownership are the inclusion and employment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the playgroups team. As well as facilitating playgroup sessions, these staff members conduct home visits, maintain regular contact with community members, and gather important feedback on the program. This will include spending a large amount of time engaging with new families each week, having a yarn with participating families about the previous week and gaining feedback on what families would like to see in the following week's session. This feedback then is incorporated into the playgroup's weekly programming.

New families are also encouraged to visit the playgroup space before they start, to introduce themselves to the environment and feel comfortable and at home as quickly as possible.

Community Elders also attend playgroup sessions, joining in on an increasingly regular basis. They are motivated by their interest in interacting with the children, having their say about what they would like for their future leaders, and reaffirming the importance of early childhood education to the younger generations. Separate events are regularly held in the group space to introduce the Elders to the space and for staff to gain knowledge and feedback on what the Elders would like to see in playgroup sessions. Such involvement by Elders ensures that the program is genuinely owned and has a multigenerational aspect to the way in which communities inform its running.

## CULTURAL SAFETY IN ALL PROGRAM ASPECTS

Cultural safety is paramount to the playgroups program, and is realised primarily through the employment and training of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members as playgroup facilitators. These facilitators' lived experiences and knowledge of the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of the region guide the design and delivery of all program elements. As the majority of program staff are local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, their community knowledge is invaluable in informing decision-making at all levels and is an essential guarantor of cultural safety. In particular, this community knowledge becomes important when the staff sit with families to discuss additional supports that families may require.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff also pass on their knowledge to non-Indigenous staff, and 'vouch' for these staff members to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members who may otherwise be cautious about interacting with unknown non-Indigenous people. Non-Indigenous staff are buddied up with and mentored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to ensure that they are culturally appropriate in their interactions with clients. They also are supported to become familiar with the communities and participating families and to establish trusted connections.




## EARLY YEARS PROGRAM ELEMENTS AND LOCATIONS, MAY 2019<sup>12</sup>

PROGRAM ELEMENT	TARGET AGES	LOCATIONS WITHIN THE MAARI MA REGION			
		BROKEN HILL	WILCANNIA	MENINDEE	IVANHOE
<b>Playgroups</b> Intensive supported playgroups supported by a cooking group for parents	0 to 5	Friday 10.30am-1pm (MM* Child & Family building) – STO**	Monday 10.30am-12.30pm (Safe House) – STO  Tuesday & Wednesday 10.30am-12.30pm (Catholic Care) – STO		
<b>HIPPY</b> Two-year home-based early learning and parenting program for families with young children in the two years before they transition to school	4 to 5	Home visits (9 days/fortnight) + parent meetings (1 day/fortnight) – STO			
<b>Little Kids and Books</b> Book reading and sharing program for young children and their families	0 to 3	Embedded in MM Playgroup (once / fortnight – Friday) – STO	Embedded in Maari Ma Playgroup (once / fortnight – Tuesday) – STO	Once / fortnight (Thursdays) at preschool. MM clinic staff attend as resources allow – STO	Once / fortnight, delivered by local playgroup staff – MM provides books, support & visits once / term – STO
<b>Wilcannia Parents as Teachers program</b> Home visiting program to enrich parents as their children's first teachers	2 to 3		Thursday, Friday: home visits with resources and support about the importance of play – STO		
<b>Literacy Schedule</b> Supplies of appropriate picture books as part of regular health checks delivered by Healthy Start program	0 to 8	Delivered through Healthy Start health checks	Delivered through Healthy Start health checks	Delivered through Healthy Start health checks	
<b>WINGS</b> Drop-in centre for children and youth	5 to 16		Early Years Program provides program and activity support as resources allow for school holidays program		

\*MM: Maari Ma

\*\*STO: School Term Only



"It's important for me and [my child] to meet and interact with other adults and children. We're meeting Aboriginal parents on safe ground, socialising in a good educational [place]"

Playgroup parent,  
Wilcannia

All new staff are required to participate in an orientation program to ensure that they have a sufficient base of cultural understanding from which to develop and that they are all employing safe cultural practices. Maari Ma finds the cultural competency activities are particularly important in environments where staff are mandatory reporters, as any circumstance where a child might be at risk is considered through a cultural lens and always first discussed with senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Cultural activities and language are also embedded into the program and significant Indigenous dates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

are always acknowledged. The local Aboriginal language, *Barkindji*, is used throughout the day, is taught during Group Time by Barkindji staff, and is the default language used when talking about body parts. Barkindji language posters have been produced specifically for the program and are displayed throughout the playgroup spaces.

One of the books provided in the Little Kids and Books section of the playgroup is *Kiilalaana marta-marri / Growing up really big Barkindji*.<sup>13</sup> This book is illustrated by a Barkindji artist and includes language, games and what to expect through the various stages of murrpa (children's) development.



The team continues to try source Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander books to share in the playgroup sessions.

The natural environment is also of utmost importance in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The playgroups' outdoor spaces are considered of equal importance to the indoor spaces, with the philosophy that anything that can be learned inside can also be learned outside.

Welcoming and including the entire family and actively recognising the roles that they play in raising their children are further critical measures to building and maintaining cultural safety within the playgroups program. Extended family members are encouraged to attend sessions and engage in activities with the children. To guarantee that everyone feels welcome, playgroup staff ensure that there is always enough food and provisions to cater for extra family members, and that there is no limit to how many family members can attend.

Additionally, Maari Ma works closely with the preschools in the region to implement the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): *Belonging, Being & Becoming*.<sup>14</sup> This is important as Maari Ma staff are conscious that they do not want to encourage families to access preschools only to find that these are not welcoming to the families or are an environment that does not reflect the different cultures from the region. Maari Ma staff endeavour to establish a relationship with the preschools, supporting them to implement the framework, and even encouraging ECEC organisations to participate in yarning circles that discuss the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into ECEC centres. In doing so, Maari Ma staff are assuring families that when their children progress to preschools, the families will find themselves in welcoming culturally safe spaces.

## STRENGTHENING AND EMPOWERING FAMILIES AND RESPONDING TO THEIR HOLISTIC NEEDS

Consistent with evidence and to meet the organisation's strong commitment to a holistic and integrated approach of all its services, the program embeds clinical and other health staff within its activities and works with other areas of the organisation to raise awareness of available

services and referral pathways for parents and carers. As mentioned earlier, Maari Ma health staff – including social workers, dietitians, child and family health nurses, and mental health workers – are integrated into playgroup activities on a roster basis and provide health information and education where appropriate. They also help families to identify pathways to other Maari Ma services, build relationships with families who may not be accessing necessary health services, and – as previously highlighted – build up a familiarity with families simply by being present at playgroup sessions.

The program not only supports the education of children but also of participating families. The Broken Hill program site hosts a weekly cooking group for parents and carers, which is led by Maari Ma's dietitian. This group creates an opportunity for parents to receive education about nutrition, recipes, healthy eating and how to provide healthy foods in the family home, while producing food for the following day's playgroup.

*"[I volunteer to help with cooking] because I enjoy it ... the recipes we use are provided by a dietitian, so we're guided by the health guidelines so we can get our kids to eat healthy ... [it] gives us ideas about ways of doing things at home"*

Playgroup parent, Broken Hill

The program team has also supported parents and carers to access diverse training opportunities by previously establishing a strong relationship with the local training college and holding short courses in the playgroup space. By hosting trainings in this space, the team have been able to help those parents and carers who do not have the confidence to attend training at the college. Parents have also been able to access skills-development programs and learn in an environment in which they already felt safe and comfortable. During this partnership, program staff also helped with transport and childcare to ensure the adults' participation. Success of these courses, and their role in empowering adult members of participating families, has been evident by how many of these adults have gone on to study further at the college; no longer requiring the active support of playgroup staff. While these courses have not been held for a while, staff are looking into re-initiating them.





*"It's a good idea, teaching me as well as my child"*

Playgroup parent

One initiative that is proving to be crucial in empowering participating families are organised family excursions to different local preschools. These excursions, arranged by program staff, appear to give families the power to make informed decisions about their children's education, including choosing their child's preschool. Maari Ma reports that after visiting the preschools in person and learning about the differences between the services, many playgroup families become very particular about which preschool they would like their children to attend.

Staff also talk about some families' misunderstanding between enrolment and attendance, and that despite children being *enrolled* in preschool, some may not *attend* regularly. Parents and carers have disclosed to staff members with whom they feel most comfortable that they feel shame about not having food for their children to take to preschool or do not have access to a vehicle to get the child to the preschool. Parents and carers are unaware that the preschools supply food and that some may provide transport. These conversations between families and trusted staff members place the program staff in important positions where they are able to support these families with knowledge and provide explanations of what to expect at each new level of early childhood education.

Playgroup staff also work closely with the Aboriginal education officers at the local primary schools to enable a smooth transition for families into kindergarten. The officers are invited to attend playgroup sessions during the second half of each year, where they can meet, connect and develop relationships with families and explain what supports will be available at the local primary schools. This connection has proven to encourage families to make use of the schools' available services and build up the confidence of parents and carers to approach teachers and express concerns that they may have for their children.

The program's purposeful integration of developmental language into its playgroup sessions and interactions with parents has also increased parents' confidence in using this language when their children attend pre- and primary school. Parents are now feeling empowered to discuss their child's development with educators through the correct terms and concepts.

Fundamentally, Maari Ma's playgroups program empowers families by breaking down those barriers that prevent these families from accessing education and health service supports. Many participating families face numerous and complex challenges in their lives, including poverty, discrimination, social isolation and poor health. The program not only works to address these barriers by engaging families across its services and programs, it also strives to exhibit a warm, flexible and non-judgmental approach where families can work on being the best parents and caregivers that they can be for their children.

*"If we can't address social issues, don't worry about early education – [the family will] miss preschool and enrolling in orientation and miss school transition etc. If they have social stuff going on they can't focus on early education. Whilst we do provide early education, we do support them in other ways with referrals to other supports"*

Intensive Supported Playgroup staff member

## SYSTEMS CHANGES NEEDED TO ENHANCE PROGRAM SUCCESS

As a health-focused organisation and in order to ensure successful service delivery, Maari Ma prides itself on implementing evidence-based best practice, including in its early childhood development activities. The organisation monitors the impact of its activities through the collection and analysis of local data, including headline indicators grouped into the three broad topic areas of health, early learning and care, and family and community. In charting these indicators over five-year intervals, a series of Maari Ma reports describes the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, their families, and their communities of far-west New South Wales over 10 years. These reports include:

1. *Maari Ma 2009 Health, development and wellbeing in far western NSW: A picture of our children*<sup>15</sup>
2. *Maari Ma 2014 Health, development and well-being in far western NSW: Our children and youth*<sup>16</sup>
3. *Maari Ma 2019 Health, development and well-being in far western NSW report – Our children and youth*<sup>17</sup>

The organisation also evaluated aspects of the Early Years Program in 2019 and a report was produced by Edward Tilton Consulting. This report found that the benefits of the greater Early Years Program "is contributing to the health and wellbeing of the Aboriginal children and families of the region by:

- supporting the social, emotional and intellectual development of children
- encouraging strong relationships between parents and children
- supporting increased skills and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents

- strengthening literacy amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- encouraging readiness for preschool then school
- encouraging social and community engagement
- providing health education in a non-judgemental, non-clinical setting
- encouraging access to other health programs
- employing and training local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff."<sup>18</sup>

Knowing the critical community engagement role played by the program's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members, Maari Ma dreams of having more funding to employ another staff member who would be able to focus all of their attention on preschool enrolments and a staff member who could focus on preschool attendance for the local communities. Program staff explain that resource limitations mean that families who are not engaged in the program are harder to access and their children are often missing out on enrolling in preschool. While children can attend preschool from the age of three, they need to be enrolled by the age of two because of limited spaces and waitlists. Families often are not aware of this, and Maari Ma reports that by the time that they have some families ready to engage with a preschool, it is too late to enrol and the family misses out on a place. The majority of places often go to high-functioning families who enrol early and more needs to be done to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who are wanting to access preschool are able to do so.

Additionally, Maari Ma staff find that they are often involved in *little* or informal conversations about the barriers that families face in accessing preschools and other services. These conversations often hold very valuable pieces of information. While feeling shamed or confused, families still feel comfortable enough to disclose their sensitivities to program staff, which places staff in important positions to be able to support these families. The organisation says that it would like to be better resourced to put staff and families in a position where they are having these conversations more regularly and are able to consistently collect and act on these important insights.



*"We quickly understood that families were attending playgroup for respite from chaos at home or elsewhere in the community; an opportunity to enjoy playing with and watching their children play"*

*Intensive Supported Playgroup staff member*

*"I can't say anything bad about the way they run things here because I've only got to look at my own son ... I didn't understand my kids until I started coming here"*

*Playgroup parent, Broken Hill*

*"[My child] didn't know how to play with kids or talk to them – he had no social skills. What Maari Ma playgroup did for [him], it built him up, really built him up"*

*Playgroup parent, Broken Hill*

*"We provide transport to most of Maari Ma's activities, be it to the clinic or playgroup or HIPPY family functions, so that this is not a barrier to families accessing these programs or activities"*

*Intensive Supported Playgroup staff member*

*"We learn about emotions [like] sad kids and see / learn how to help them"*

*Playgroup parent, Broken Hill*

*"The workers have ... been educated in the different issues that children have [and] really helped me ... understand [my child] and helped us grow together"*

*Playgroup parent*

# ENDNOTES

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3. Alperstein et al. 2009, p. 2.
4. Ierace, J, Alperstein, G, Kennedy, C & Dyer C December 2014, *Health, development and well-being in far western NSW: Our children and youth*, Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation, NSW, p. 55.
5. Tilton & Devitt 2009.
6. Interview with Maari Ma Early Years Program team 2020.
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8. Maari Ma 2021, About us webpage.
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