


VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD CARE AGENCY

Koorie Kids 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.

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
Koorie Kids Supported Playgroups
Melbourne, Victoria

ACRONYMS

AIFS Australian Institute of Family Studies

VACCA Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency



OVERVIEW

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) has been delivering Koorie Kids supported playgroups to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families for over 15 years. This program follows a primary prevention model aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through a culturally sensitive approach and in a fun and empowering environment, this VACCA program prepares Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged five years and younger for kindergarten and preschool while building families' parenting and education skills.

In recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are best placed to determine what works for their families, these playgroups become valuable places for children and their parent/ carers to gather with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, build social connections, access formal and informal supports, discover their heritage, and learn about their culture. In turn, the playgroups work towards VACCA's core purpose of supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and realising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' right to self-determination.



THE PROGRAM

VACCA currently runs 12 Koorie Kids supported playgroups in three metropolitan Melbourne regions – six in the south, three in the north, and four in the west. These playgroups are delivered weekly during the school term and are staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators who have knowledge of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services. The venues are purposefully “safe, comfortable and non-stigmatising”,¹ while the groups’ programs are shaped by participants in order to establish community ownership.

The program is offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their Aboriginal and/or non-Aboriginal parents/carers, with non-Aboriginal siblings also able to participate. Families are referred from other VACCA programs,² Victoria’s child protection services and non-Aboriginal programs. The program is funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

“The playgroups are relevant to children in out-of-home care, families needing support in raising their children and other community members who are interested in participating in a cultural playgroup”.³

Families generally attend playgroups until their child is connected with a kindergarten. However, VACCA recognises that there are currently a limited number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kindergartens available in Victoria, and so continues to welcome families to the playgroups even if the children are also attending non-Aboriginal kindergartens. To encourage participation, VACCA also assists with travel to and from the groups, particularly for those families who lack access to transport.

SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS

Supported playgroups are local community-based groups that bring together preschool-aged children and their parents/carers to facilitate play and social activities.⁴ These groups are run by facilitators

who are trained in early childhood education and who aim to support families with particular needs or vulnerabilities.⁵ The groups focus on parental participation and child directed learning,⁶ going further than normal playgroups by providing children and parents/carers with safe and familiar environments in which they can learn together through the relaxed informal activity of play.

Current evidence indicates that these types of playgroups may improve social supports for parents/carers and increase their ability to care for young children. At the same time, these supported groups improve children’s social skills and create new opportunities in which they can learn. The groups also have the potential to be soft entry points that link families to formal supports while delivering key messages that promote child health.⁷

As a supported playgroup program, Koorie Kids fosters intentional learning and play amongst children and their parents/carers as well as facilitates positive parent/carer-child interactions, early childhood development and school readiness. Through structured and unstructured activities, parents/carers are encouraged to participate with their children. These activities are carefully planned into playgroup sessions with the aim to address the needs of the attending parents/carers, and include preparing healthy meals, book reading, story telling, arts and crafts, and physical activities, such as dancing. They are based on sessions and term plans that are carefully developed by the program teams at the end of the previous term. In their planning, teams draw on community feedback and the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care: *Belonging, Being & Becoming*.⁸

Playgroup teams know that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/carers may not have attended playgroups or participated in preschool activities as children.⁹ As such, all activities are offered with the purpose to build parents’/carers’ confidence and parenting skills, especially as they are recognised as their children’s first educators. By being immersed in this early learning environment, parents/carers can watch qualified early childhood educators role model positive teaching behaviours, are given practical knowledge of early childhood education and development, and are empowered to take responsibility for the care, nurturing, education and protection of their children.

The playgroups intentionally promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing practices, cultural identity and pride while demonstrating how

connection to culture is interrelated with education, health and wellbeing. Parents/carers are supported to “identify and discover their heritage, feel empowered to pursue knowledge and traditions of importance to them, and to connect and participate in their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community”.¹⁰ Through activities that encourage teamwork, they learn skills of collaboration, leadership and accountability as well as how to manage challenging life tasks and stresses. In turn, by participating in these facilitated opportunities, parents/carers maximise their capacity to make informed decisions.¹¹

During each session, facilitators observe both children and families in a relaxed home-like setting. They use this time to identify children who may be displaying health or developmental needs and families who may require additional support or crisis intervention. The facilitators then consult with a family in need in this relaxed and familiar setting, build trust to understand the family’s situation, and refer them to relevant services within and outside of VACCA.



This referral process is strengthened by facilitators regularly inviting guest speakers from local communities and services, who then present information on their area of expertise and provide additional supports and advice. To date, these speakers have included maternal and child health nurses, dentists and occupational therapists. The attendance of these guests is a critical feature of supported playgroups, in the recognition that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/carers are isolated from supports and/or unaware of how to seek culturally appropriate supports. In particular, maternal child health nurse visits are a common event that allows parents/carers to develop relationships with key community workers and seek support as needed.

The playgroups also offer a safe space for parents/carers to access mentoring and peer support, both through the guest speakers and other parents/carers. Speakers make themselves available during play time and are on-hand to help families consider their health and wellbeing while the playgroup environment offers a comfortable and non-judgemental space where families can feel empowered to engage directly and on equal terms with these health professionals. Occasionally, other visitors are invited to attend, based on needs identified among the group. In the past, this has included financial advisers who were able to support families in financial stress.

Playgroup facilitators also support families to enrol their children in further education and link families with kindergartens, preschools, and specialised education support services.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Fundamental to the success of VACCA’s playgroup model is that it is based within a community-controlled organisation, supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and is led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitators who have early childhood qualifications and strong connections to local communities. These factors ensure that the program is genuinely suited and responsive to the needs and culture of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that it serves.

Without this local knowledge, playgroup staff would not be able to identify culturally safe education and health pathways. Their local knowledge and community connections also help them to identify the most appropriate community members and support services to include in playgroup sessions.

The active participation of parents/carers, community members and Elders gives cultural authority to the groups and encourages other parents/carers to join in on the sessions with their own children. Further to this, the groups demonstrate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities are best positioned to identify their own needs by having parents/carers, Elders, community members and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations shape the programs to ensure particular kinship, family and cultural requirements are met.¹²

The culturally informed program model compels sessions and activities to be flexible and respond to different community needs as and when they arise. This responsive approach is strengthened by having two workers rostered into every session, unlike most mainstream supported playgroups that only roster on one worker at a time. This pairing gives facilitators more time to observe parenting interactions and child development, and to focus on each family during a session. It also helps facilitators build stronger relationships of trust with each family and develop a holistic understanding of families' needs and education goals. Facilitators report that VACCA playgroups provide parents/carers with a non-judgemental safe space in which they feel confident to raise concerns and discuss challenges that they might be experiencing individually or as a family.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT

VACCA is an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation and has been protecting and promoting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities for over 40 years. Its supported playgroups are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based initiative and are purposefully implemented in sites that the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has identified as having the most need. These groups intentionally facilitate close connections to the communities in which they are based and collaborate with services present in the area.

Over the past four decades, VACCA has become the lead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family organisation in Victoria. It employs over 600 staff and has six offices located across the state with over 70 programs assisting thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people each year. VACCA also provides some state-wide services. As such, it is one of the largest organisations of its kind in Australia and one of Victoria's biggest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employers. It trains organisations on how to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and remains a strong advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights.¹³

"Together with the Aboriginal community, we design, develop and deliver programs that build on peoples' strengths. We understand intergenerational trauma, and that healing occurs in the context of developing relationships, connection to culture, community, and Country"

VACCA website

VACCA's Koorie Kids supported playgroups engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in the planning of each term's activities by responding to feedback provided by the parents/carers who attend. Sessions draw on local knowledge, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultural protocols, and groups offer other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations a place where they can share resources and connect to the community. On occasion, the groups host local community events, which help both participants and other community members to engage in cultural experiences and develop a sense of pride in community and culture.

Rigorous community engagement mechanisms have been established by VACCA to ensure that the playgroups program is genuinely community-led. In addition to seeking direct community feedback on term plans, community members also provide input through an anonymous client feedback tool, which is readily available to all participants and community members. Information gathered through this tool helps staff capture the advice and recommendations of community members in a culturally safe way and amend the program as required. VACCA has been collecting participant and community feedback for a number of years and continues to use this data to shape the program's activities and structure as community needs and perspectives change.



The playgroups also connect children and families with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and other community members, and in doing so develop participants' cultural knowledge and identities and build their connections to culture and community. Elders help to reinforce cultural and language skills, while the honouring of Traditional Owners of the land teaches children how to behave at cultural events and how to greet one another in language. This has noticeably developed a sense of pride in the children.¹⁴

CULTURAL SAFETY IN ALL PROGRAM ASPECTS

As an early-years program, and because VACCA understands that culture is a protective factor for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the playgroups seek to build an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child's sense of cultural identity at a young age. All playgroups are designed to support children and families to strengthen their connection to culture. VACCA makes sure that playgroup materials are culturally appropriate and encourage cultural learnings.

Sessions and extracurricular events are organised in a way that allow children to engage in cultural knowledge sharing and celebrate their cultural identity. Activities draw on cultural resources and use cultural protocols, including children deciding on what wording to use in an Acknowledgement to Country. Reading and storytelling are based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander books and stories, music is produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, and arts and craft activities focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural art, while playgroup spaces are decorated with cultural materials such as possum skins. Community Elders regularly attend playgroup sessions to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and languages; lead reading and storytelling; run workshops on arts, crafts and food; and generally engage with children and parents/carers.

Importantly, all Koorie Kids supported playgroups are run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who have a deep knowledge and understanding of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, including its families, services and events. Staff also use VACCA's culturally appropriate program manual to inform and guide their work.



A number of playgroup parents/carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are non-Aboriginal themselves, and as such they may be lacking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge. The heavy cultural component of these playgroups support them and their children to realise the children's cultural rights, ensuring children are building cultural knowledge and connections to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, events and activities.

"On one particular excursion to the Healesville Sanctuary, 120 adults and children were taken to enjoy the zoo and meet with a Wurundjeri Elder. It was the first excursion where the participants wore their Koorie Kids Playgroup t-shirts and felt themselves to be a real tribe. The children were gifted with clapping sticks and made a beautiful noise while singing with the Elder"¹⁵

RESPONDING TO THE HOLISTIC NEEDS OF FAMILIES

A crucial element of the supported playgroups program is its integrated response to strengthening families and its referrals and linkages to other programs and specialist services, providing holistic wraparound supports to participating families. With the playgroups linked to VACCA's suite of programs, a broad network of services is created around each family.

Before beginning at a playgroup, each family meets with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander facilitator to discuss their specific needs. If additional support requirements are identified, the facilitator connects the family with these services and supports the family to break down access barriers to these services. Throughout the term, facilitators provide parents/carers with information and advice about support services and how to access these, as well as regularly sets up appointments on behalf of families. Facilitators also help connect parents/carers with local mainstream kindergartens and primary schools so that parents/carers can make informed decisions about their children's future, and enrol their children in a timely manner into the most suitable kindergarten for their child.

STRENGTHENING AND EMPOWERING FAMILIES

VACCA's playgroups are committed to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/carers so that they can effectively support their own children. To achieve this, the groups are designed to provide parents/carers with opportunities and tools that will build their skills, confidence and capabilities. In turn, parents/carers can then strengthen their children's learning, developmental and cultural needs.

Some families who attend Koorie Kids playgroups are socially isolated, at risk, currently involved with the Victorian child protection system or referred from other VACCA programs. These families have found that by attending playgroups, they are listened to and respected, are able to build up a network of connections with their peers, are offered opportunities to build up their parenting and professional skills, and learn how to work towards family wellbeing. Gradually, their attendance in these groups also increases their sense of belonging and reinforces their cultural identity, which in turn strengthens the family unit.

As previously mentioned, families are regularly contacted to provide feedback and suggestions for developing the playgroups' term plans, tailoring these to their children's circumstances and requirements. By engaging in the program in this way, parents/carers develop their decision-making and leadership skills and teamwork capacities. Their participation in sessions helps to establish positive family learning habits and exposes parents/carers to educational and developmental languages that they can use in future discussions with their children's teachers. They also gain knowledge of and establish ownership in their children's educational objectives.

Improving the social and emotional wellbeing of parents/carers often improves their resilience and builds their confidence to access other support services. Facilitators and other VACCA staff have observed parents/carers building up positive relationships with others through mentoring and by learning positive social interactions and self-regulation through the role modelling displayed in the playgroups.



KOORIE KIDS PLAYGROUPS AND COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic forced an immediate stop to the playgroups' face-to-face sessions in early 2020, to ensure the safety of the children, families and VACCA staff. The program quickly looked into how to continue supporting families, especially during such a stressful period. The team created and delivered activity and self-care packs, which included cultural activities, links to virtual cultural content, cooking activities, up-to-date information on the pandemic and personal protective equipment, such as hand sanitiser and masks.

As 2020 progressed, VACCA staff provided families with a virtual playgroup through Facebook Live and Facebook video posts. This was hugely successful, with the online content reaching more families and a much wider audience than the face-to-face playgroups. Playgroup teams also created online content to share through Facebook groups and run online playgroups sessions. Facilitators provided families with links to cultural activities, wellbeing and mindfulness activities, and self-care guides. Families were also offered access to VACCA's Family and Children's Day NAIDOC event and broader NAIDOC activities, such as flag raising, and virtual walks with community Elders.

EVALUATION PROCESS AND RESOURCES

VACCA currently is evaluating its playgroups program to contribute to the organisation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family services evidence base. The purpose of the evaluation is to document the program model and understand emergent benefits for attending children and families. This evaluation is expected to identify the enablers and barriers of the program so that success factors can be scaled up and challenges overcome.

So far, VACCA has identified that greater funding would increase the success of the program, particularly as it would ensure more resources for playgroup activities, allow a greater provision of cultural activities, and increase the provision of transport to and from playgroups. Currently, transport is a critical component in encouraging and securing families' attendance at playgroups.

More generally, the low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kindergartens also remains a barrier. In this case, some families stay with a playgroup to maintain cultural connections when they cannot find and access any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kindergartens.

Using VACCA's evaluation framework and the definition of evidence-informed practice recognised in the Victorian child and family services sector, the current four-stage evaluation draws on evidence from relevant research, practitioners' knowledge, and client preferences and values. During the first phase, the program logic was developed by evaluators working with playgroup facilitators to outline the evidence and assumptions that underpin the logic model, service activities, and short-, medium- and long-term outcomes. The program logic is based on the changes that facilitators observe in parents/carers and children who attend the playgroups.

This phase led to the development of two program logics, when evaluators recognised that different outcomes are being achieved for children and parents/carers. Figures 1 and 2 show the short- and medium-term outcomes that playgroups aim to achieve for children and parents/carers respectively.

The evaluation's second phase involved the development of a data plan and tool to measure the outcomes identified in these program logics.

In mid-2021, VACCA completed the third stage of the evaluation: collecting quantitative and qualitative data. However, the inability to run face-to-face playgroups has impacted the availability of quantitative outcomes data.

The final stage involves analysis, sense making and reporting, and is scheduled from July to November 2021.

At the core of the evaluation is the development of the program's ongoing monitoring system, which will see the continued measurement of outcomes beyond the evaluation, using an outcomes measurement tool to understand the benefits provided by the program.

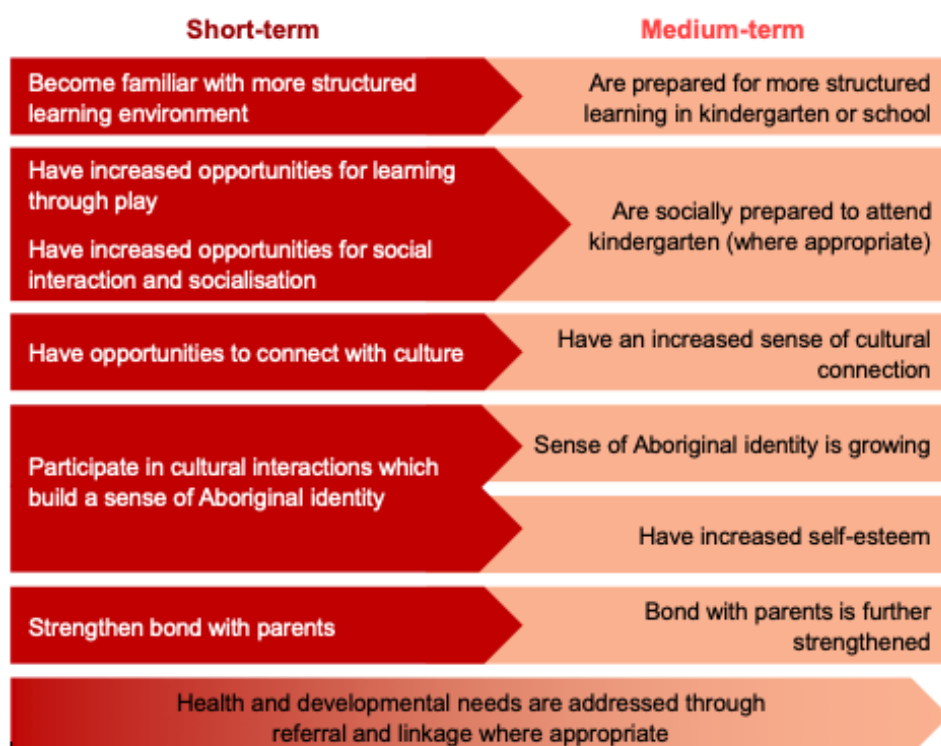


Figure 1 Outcomes for children attending Koorie Kids support playgroups

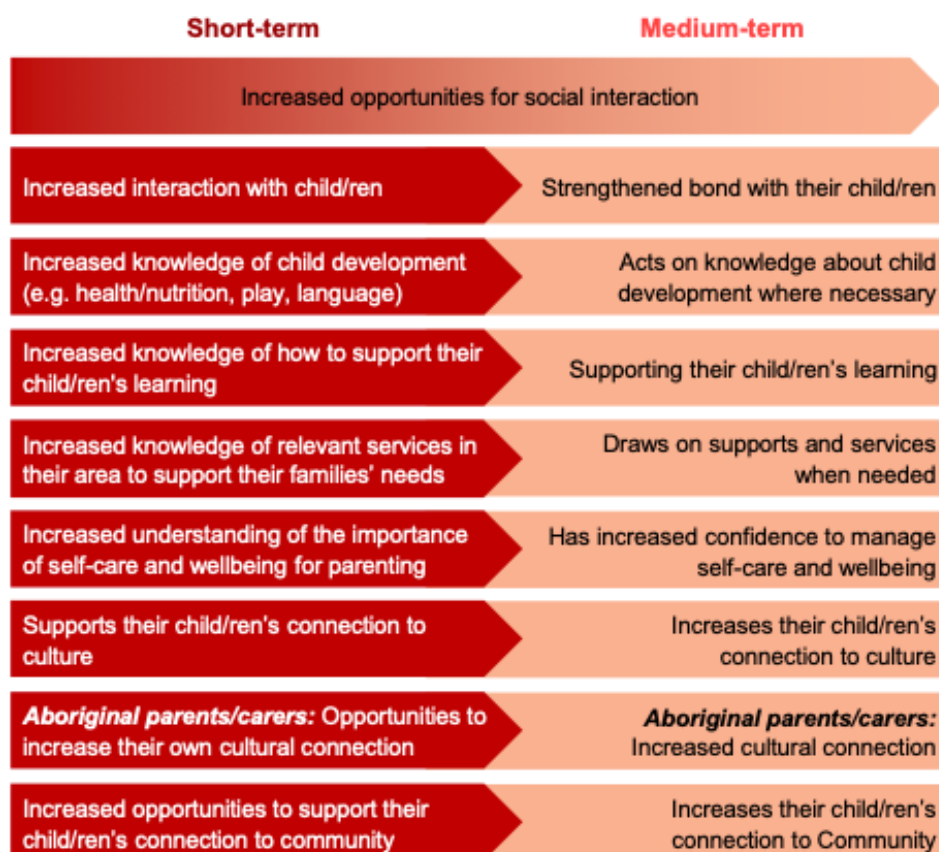


Figure 2 Outcomes for parents/carers attending Koorie Kids support playgroups





ENDNOTES

1. Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 2016, *Southern VACCA Koorie Kids Playgroup: Knowledge Circle Practice Profiles*, accessed 2021.
2. Other VACCA programs include the *Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder* program and VACCA Family Services.
3. AIFS 2016, *Southern VACCA Koorie Kids Playgroup*.
4. Commerford, J & Robinson, E 2016, 'Supported Playgroups for parents/carers and children: The evidence for their benefits', *Child and Family Community Australia* Paper No 40, 2016, p. 2.
5. Commerford & Robinson 2016, p. 3.
6. Murdoch Children's Research Institute and Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health October 2014, *Evaluation of the Early Learning is Fun Program: Final Report, 2012-2014*, prepared for Berry Street Victoria, p. 1.
7. Commerford & Robinson 2016, p.2.
8. Australian Government Department of Education and Training for the Council of Australian Governments 2019, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*, Canberra.
9. AIFS 2016, *Southern VACCA Koorie Kids Playgroup*.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. VACCA 2021, *Our History* webpage.
14. AIFS 2016, *Southern VACCA Koorie Kids Playgroup*.
15. Ibid.

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- Australian Institute of Family Studies 2016, *Southern VACCA Koorie Kids Playgroup: Knowledge Circle Practice Profiles*. Available at: <https://apps.aifs.gov.au/ipppregister/projects/southern-vacca-koorie-kids-playgroup>
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