



Victorian Aboriginal
Children & Young
People's Alliance

Strengthening Early Years Stakeholder Engagement

September 2023

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA) believes there is urgent need for greater understanding, investment, and support for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within the context of the Early Years sector.

As an alliance of 15 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, authorised to deliver child and family services, we play a crucial role in driving change to achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Our young mob often fall through the gaps of a services system not designed or structured to meet their needs.

This is an area of growing concern throughout the sector and the VACYPA is committed to working with our stakeholders and Government partners to ensure our young mob no longer slip through the gaps and have opportunities to grow and thrive in their communities.

Background

The Closing the Gap report (2021) Outcome 4: showed that only 35.6 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across Victoria commencing school were assessed as being developmentally on track in all five Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains. That is less than half of all Victorian Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children, we can and need to do much better than this.

As recommended by the Yoorok Justice Report (Sept 2023): The Victorian Government must now:

a) work with Aboriginal organisations to develop a consistent definition of 'early help', 'early intervention

and prevention' that aligns with the perspectives of Victorian First Peoples. This definition should be adopted across the Victorian Government, b) enshrine prevention and early help/intervention measures as a guiding principle in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic), and take all necessary steps to implement this principle in the administration of the Act, c) immediately and substantially increase investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) prevention and early help/intervention services to keep First Peoples children out of the child protection system and prevent their involvement from escalating when it does occur, and d) review the governance model for implementing target 12 of the Closing the Gap Agreement, with a view to broadening the responsibility for achieving this target beyond the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

VACYPA believes that early years is an area of significant under-investment from all levels of Government which has impacted the 64.4% of Aboriginal children who are not developmentally on track.

Before moving to address this underinvestment in early years, it is important to acknowledge that the issues facing our families and communities are sensitive, multifaceted, and complex. Capturing and understanding these issues in a re-designed service system that addresses and empowers our families, children and young people should be a whole of government priority.

In reference to [VACYPA Reform agenda](#) the following are integral to incorporate in this discussion.

1. Every Aboriginal child and young person should have access to the same local Aboriginal early years and youth programs and support whether they live in metropolitan or regional Victoria.



2. ACCOs should be funded and supported to deliver or partner with other providers to support culturally rich services for Aboriginal children and families through: Culture, Ceremony, Connection – yarning circles, programs, activities, and events Engagement – strengths-based services focused on prevention and early help including early childhood education and care; school readiness; playgroups Preservation – Enhanced maternal and child health services; family support services Care Services – statutory interventions.

VACYPA believes the Yoorook recommendations, our reform agenda and the following are practical actions to be taken over the next three years, as part of the early years work, to align with and/or complement these strategies and frameworks and further support Self Determination and cultural safety.

Recommendations

VACYPA led research into existing Best Practice Models delivered by ACCO's: Examining existing best practice models that are already operational throughout Victoria can provide valuable insights for enhancing early childhood support initiatives. Notable examples include the successful partnership between Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative and Warrnambool City Council within the Aboriginal Maternal Child Health Initiative. Additionally, Whittlesea Council's "Deadly Boorais, Deadly Families" partnership between Maternal Child Health and community is achieving great outcomes and engagement. To ensure the scalability of successful models across various communities, a funding mechanism can be established to support the setup of similar localized initiatives. This approach encourages the sharing of effective practices and enables communities to adapt these models to their unique needs.

Several ACCOs deliver the Department of Education funded Koorie Preschool Advisor (KPSA) program and have remodelled it to also include a Cultural Education component where local KPSA worker delivers local Cultural Education programs. The success of this model makes it an excellent model and area to expand funding on. By teaching local Cultural

Education in Early Years services, ACCOs are supporting and strengthening young Aboriginal people (and their families) and nurturing and reinforcing their cultural identity. The teaching of Australian history has been notably and disgracefully missing from all Australian curricula for too long. By introducing Australian history in early years, ACCOs have given Aboriginal children a sense of solidarity with their peers. Some ACCOs (Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative) have self-funded Early Years Centres which have a cultural lens throughout the whole centre- from the infrastructure to the daily experiences. Modelling and educating First Nations Culture in this way is an unmet need which constitutes a gap in the Early Years Sector. We need to prioritise funding centres that are designed and operated by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to address this gap in early years' service provision by ACCOs. These ACCOs have demonstrated that doing so is reconciliation at its finest.

We also strongly recommend funding of Koorie Early Years Hub- to align with each ACCO across Victoria (as requested by the community).

Koorie Early Years Hubs include long day care/kindergarten, family support programs, therapeutic programs, Koorie Maternity Services etc. This holistic, culturally safe approach to supporting Aboriginal children from infancy will certainly help close the developmental gap for Aboriginal children by providing them with culturally safe, effective early help supports and interventions in practical/individualised ways which support and empower communities.

Strong Relationships and Partnerships: Building strong relationships and partnerships between mainstream service providers and ACCOs will improve early years' service delivery. Because mainstream early years services often care for Aboriginal children this type of collaboration ensures that services are culturally sensitive and draw on the expertise of both parties.

VACYPA also believes there should be cross-sector collaboration and knowledge about services in ACCOs by universal and mainstream services. For instance, family violence funding and support should be expanded to include early intervention and medical practitioners should be made aware of ACCO services to be able to refer Aboriginal children to ACCOs for



early services and supports. When considering this whole of government approach, we must also take into consideration the complexity of dealing with both state and federal funding in early years including data issues, funding and reporting issues, juggling or being creative in-service delivery. Whilst there is no simple answer to the level of complexity in which ACCOs manage different funding, the Victorian Government can address the gaps by understanding what is funded, what is identified as a need by community and support the ACCO to deliver Early Years services that is Aboriginal-led and culturally safe. Streamlined processes will ensure that it is not burdensome on ACCO's and still delivers meaningful data on efficacy and outcomes.

Inclusion of Aboriginal Health Practitioner: Decisions about the provision of early years services and supports for Aboriginal children are currently made in the absence of an Aboriginal Health Practitioner. The insights and expertise of Aboriginal Health Practitioners at the decision-making table is essential and results in culturally appropriate and effective program development.

Community-Defined Outcomes: Rather than being determined solely by specific guidelines/entry points, outcomes and service supports should be defined in collaboration with the local communities. ACCOs are by definition and practice community controlled; and are therefore well placed to engage local communities around defining community outcomes. This ensures that the services provided are aligned with the unique needs and aspirations of the local community.

Monitoring Implementation and regular reviews: Regularly monitoring the implementation of programs is crucial. Capturing community's voice helps identify successes and areas needing improvement, enabling timely adjustments to achieve desired outcomes.

Co-Designed Localised Supports: Collaboratively designing localised supports such as parenting programs, Koori Maternity Services, with input from ACCO and Community members will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of early years services. This approach ensures that services are culturally sensitive and responsive to the specific needs of the community which will ensure their longevity and effectiveness.

Priority Access to Universal Services: Ensuring priority access to culturally safe and universally accessible services is paramount. This includes simplifying the processes for accessing these services and tailoring them to ensure cultural safety. Currently the lack of priority access means that we miss the opportunity to improve outcomes.

Needs Based Service Expansion: Growth and service expansion across the state is important, to address current service access and avoid creating pockets of low or no access. A strategic approach to growth planning, which is based on reliable and consistent data, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, will allow more ensure equitable distribution of services to reach all communities.

Workforce Development strategies: Strong partnerships between training organisations and ACCOs. Funding and supports given to ACCO for place-based traineeships. Pro-bono secondments from departmental bodies to ACCOs to support the development of programs and Early Years models.

