Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People's Alliance

RAPID REVIEW OF EVIDENCE & PRACTICE

ACCO-Integrated Early Year hubs

October 2026

Artwork

Tarsha Davis is a Kuku Yalanji and Palawa woman and multidisciplinary artist. This artwork represents the Victorian Aboriginal Child and Young People's Alliance as an interconnected system, a network of organisations that are both distinct and mutually reinforcing, working together to support Aboriginal children, young people, and families across Victoria. Thedesign acknowledges both the diversity and collective strength of VACYPA 15 organisation members. Each solid-fill circle in the base layer represents one of these organisations and their unique contributions to education, wellbeing, and cultural continuity.

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge and respect the traditions and culture of all First Nations people in Australia. We honour Elders, past and present, and extend our respect to the children of community, who are the future custodians of Country.

The heart of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance is to continue the legacy of advocacy from Members, truly enabling self-determination. ACCOs have always existed in the understanding that supporting strong families grows strong children and young people. The power and resilience of our families and children is reflected in a strong Community.

We thank Members for their tireless efforts for supporting families to raise children safely, so they can thrive and grow up strong, connected to Community and culture.

About the review series

The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA) conducts regular rapid reviews of evidence and practice relevant to our Member ACCOs. The aim is to advance understanding of what works in improving outcomes for Aboriginal families, children and young people with focus on the nature and impact of Aboriginal-led services.

For more information about how these reviews were conducted or to suggest future topics of focus, please visi**t [weblink].**

Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People's Alliance

ACCO-Integrated Early Years Hubs

A rapid review of evidence and practice

Background and context

In 2025, the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance (VACYPA) engaged its member ACCOs to clarify their aspirations for their families, children and young people. The most common theme was the will to deliver early childhood education and care (ECEC) that integrates a range of universal and targeted services within culturally grounded community hubs (VACYPA 2025, 23). This review supports this aspiration by summarising existing evidence on ACCO-integrated early years hubs, with focus on what it means for effective practice in the context of Aboriginal self-determination in child protection systems.

Key terms and concepts

Integrated early years services are joined up supports for young children and their carers with a focus on healthy childhood development from ages 0 to 5 (SNAICC 2024). Integration means that services are delivered in a way that is coordinated, with providers sharing responsibility, exchanging information and planning together to ensure families receive holistic support. Integrated service approaches strongly align with how ACCOs address complex circumstances facing their communities by providing wraparound support steeped in cultural care (SNAICC 2023).

Locating all services in a single place is not a definitive requirement for integration, however some communities benefit from access to **Early Childhood Hubs** where families can connect with a range of complementary services such as childcare, pre-school, maternal and child health, wellbeing and social supports (Dandolopartners 2024). These are sometimes embedded within larger scale **Child and Family Hubs,** which support people from pregnancy through primary school and can include broader programs for carers to build capabilities such as literacy, nutritional food preparation and job readiness (Sydenham, et al. 2026).

Integrated hubs tailor their models to put local children and families at the centre of service delivery and, as such, **they can and *should* look quite different from one another** when it comes to which services they provide and how (Goldfeld 2026).

Benefits and Best Practices

Evidence specific to Aboriginal children

Proven benefits of ACCO-integrated early years hubs for Aboriginal children include:

- **Trusted relationships** that increase opportunities for supporting Aboriginal children, especially those experiencing developmental or health challenges (Campbell, et al. 2018)
- **Strengthened cultural connections, education and identity** enhancing childhood development, wellbeing and readiness for school (Sydenham, et al. 2026, SNAICC 2024, SNAICC 2014)
- **Early identification of developmental vulnerabilities** and ability to address them through sustained, strengths-based and culturally safe engagement with children and families (SNAICC 2024)

In the context of child protection, the value of these benefits is heightened (SNAICC 2026). Evidence emerging from the 'Bring Them Home, Keep Them Home' study indicates the crucial role of trusted relationships and cultural connections and calls for the sector to:

> *'Reimagine [family] preservation and reunification as one and the same for Aboriginal children... This requires moving away from a child protection mentality that focuses on family surveillance, risk, and investigation, to a focus on a child and family well-being system oriented towards prevention, with multi-disciplinary teams who can understand and support children's health and developmental needs, as well as parental health and wellbeing.' (Newton, et al. 2025, 269-270)*

International evidence relevant to Aboriginal children

An international systematic review of programs for pregnant mothers identified four with evidence of preventing child removal, all of which featured trusted relationships, strengths-based, multi-disciplinary wraparound support delivered in non-judgmental spaces where parents feel safe to share and heal together (Ariyo, Awortwe and Cudjoe 2025). Two of these programs were delivered in Australia by ACCOs (Segal, et al. 2018, O'Dea, et al. 2024)

Studies of integrated 'hub' models in Australia and internationally have shown that children who access them additionally benefit from:

- Better educational outcomes, fewer hospitalisations and lower youth crime rates (Carneiro, et al. 2025)
- Improved mental health (Honisett, et al. 2022, Olson, et al. 2021)
- Increased rates of developmental screening and stabilization of neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD (Hayre, et al. 2025)
- Increased school readiness (Telethon Kids Institute & Minderoo Foundation 2014)
- More knowledgeable and confident caregivers (Moore 2021, Taylor, et al. 2017)

Investing in best practice

The benefits outlined above translate to cost efficiencies for governments, with a recent social return on investment evaluation estimating that community hubs across Australia generate $3.50 in social value for every $1.00 invested (Deloitte 2024).

Extensive research on barriers to full realization of these benefits has been undertaken by SNAICC (2024) and other experts in childhood development (Sydenham, et al. 2026) and systems change (Dandolopartners 2024) Figure 1 provides a snapshot of their findings.

BARRIERS

Fragmented funding mechanisms

- Limit collaboration
- Constrain joint planning
- Burden ACCOs with multiple disjointed administrative requirements
- Leave attempts at coordination under-resourced and reliant on community leaders, contributing to burnout
- Prioritise activity-specific data collection over measures of meaningful progress
- Inhibit strategic pooling of resources
- Lack sufficient investment in crucial cultural components of care
- Make it difficult for Aboriginal families to engage with services, particularly the Child Care Subsidy system

Workforce shortages

- Disproportionately affect Aboriginal communities
- Are greater in regional and remote locations
- Disrupt care in ways that undermine trust and children's expectations around need-fulfillment (Moore 2021)

Siloed service systems

- Complicate cross-sector cooperation
- Discourage information sharing and shared decision-making
- Leave policy makers and practitioners reliant on sector-specific lag indicators such as long-term education or health outcomes
- Result in duplication and missed opportunities
- Fail to embed cultural safety, leaving Aboriginal families to navigate services marked by long histories of institutional racism

ENABLERS

Dedicated ACCO Early Years funding

- Resources a combination of core services and flexible offerings
- Entails co-contribution by Federal, State and Territory Governments
- Covers the full cost of embedding culture in all aspects of service delivery
- Embeds flexibility, acknowledging that no single model of service integration is suitable for all communities
- Minimises administrative burden
- Empowers ACCOs to reliably deliver high-quality services in ways that best meet community need

Glue

- Defined as a set of core components (such as people, relationships and administrative structures) that hold services together for a shared purpose
- Analysis of 13 Early Childhood Hubs in Australia found those with funded 'glue' established 22 times more services with higher levels of integration and strong governance structures (SVA 2025)

Investment in the Aboriginal workforce

- Develops professional skills and leadership of people who reflect community strengths
- Amplifies cultural knowledge and relational capacity
- Provides adequate pay and long-term job security
- Supports workers to manage the psychological demands of providing trauma-informed care for children and families with complex needs

Meaningful data

- Informs strategic decision-making
- Measures success as rooted in cultural ties between Aboriginal children and their communities
- Focuses on consistent lead indicators to track whether actions are working as intended and provide real-time insights to guide improvement

Aboriginal self-determination

- Empowers the people best placed to do the core relational work that drives service integration
- Recognizes ACCOs' leadership in providing holistic care rooted in cultural strength, trust, pride and deep connections with community and Country

Figure 1: Barriers and enablers of ACCO-integrated hubs (Dandodolopartners 2024; SNAICC 2024; Sydenham, et al. 2026)

Examples of ACCO-integrated care in the early years

Yappera Children's Service Co-Operative

Yappera is an Aboriginal led Child and Family Hub in Thornbury, VIC. Signified by its name, which means 'Belonging Place', Yappera has provided a culturally grounded setting where Aboriginal children and their parents, carers and community gather, learn and strengthen wellbeing. Services provided on site include long day care, kinder, bush kinder, cultural education, school readiness support, maternal and child health services, dental checks, audiology and optometry screenings, immunisations and speech therapy. Yappera additionally hosts family and community wellness activities led by local Aboriginal people, including Elders (Yappera 2020). Yappera has provided holistic learning and care since 1981, weathering significant administrative barriers as described by CEO Stacey Brown: 'I've seen my role shift significantly — from leading pedagogy to being consumed by administration… With up to eight different funding sources, each requiring separate, often quarterly reports — covering data, compliance, KPIs, budgets, and milestones — it's an immense administrative load' (SVA 2025, 27).

Birthing in Our Community (BiOC)

BiOC is a First Nations led model of integrated care with strong evidence of success preserving and strengthening families, while preventing the lifelong negative impacts of infant removal (O'Dea, et al. 2024) Developed in 2013 as a partnership between the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH), the Brisbane Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service and Mater Mothers' Hospital, BiOC now operates from five hubs in southeast QLD. Women accessing the program during pregnancy are paired with a First Nations Family Support Worker from the local community who facilitates strengths-based support in close cooperation with a dedicated midwife trained in cultural responsiveness and community-controlled service providers that can help address social stressors and worries including homelessness, food insecurity, financial distress, and safety in the home. Family Support Workers serve as cultural intermediaries who advocate for women before, during and after childbirth as well as connecting them with culturally safe family strengthening activities in their local area such as playgroups, mental health supports for mums and dads and community events (IUIH 2026).

Tools and resources

National Child & Family Hubs Network – Part of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, this network enables integrated service providers to connect and share insights. Webinars, publications and advocacy tools they have produced can be accessed here: https://www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au/resources/publications-and-tools/

Birthing in Our Community – To learn more about this integrated service and hear from women about their experiences engaging with it during and after pregnancy, watch their 'Our Journey' video here: https://www.iuih.org.au/services/bioc/ Additional videos detailing their service model and providing practical tips and support for families with young children are available here: https://www.youtube.com/@bioctv

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