

“Children’s Ground made the impossible possible for Bininj”

Bininj family member, 2017

Children’s Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem

Final Evaluation
2013–2017

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, Children's Ground would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank the Bininj children, families and leaders in Kakadu. They made the first implementation of Children's Ground a reality in Kakadu - and brought life to the dream of many First Nations people past and present.

Children's Ground wishes to thank our family of community, philanthropic and government funding partners and supporters. Your vision and support provided the space for innovation and systems reform led by the Bininj community in Kakadu.

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Children's Ground thanks our national Research Advisory Group for their support and guidance. Your contribution to analysis of data, findings and conclusions has been invaluable.

Professor Komla Tsey: Research Professor, Centre for Research and Innovation in Sustainability Education, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University

Associate Professor David Thomas: Head, Wellbeing and Preventable Chronic Disease, Menzies School of Health Research

Associate Professor Sally Brinkman: Co-Director, Fraser Mustard Centre. Senior Research Fellow, Telethon Kids Institute

Mr Matthew James: Senior Executive, Housing and Specialised Services Group and Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Dr Tim Moore: Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Professor Sven Silburn: (ret. previously) Director, Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research

Professor Fiona Arney: Director, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia

Children's Ground acknowledges and appreciates all the volunteers who generously gave their time, energy and commitment to supporting the children, families and community throughout Children's Ground operations in Kakadu.

Children's Ground also acknowledges and thanks all Bininj and Balanda staff who worked with families and the Kakadu community across the three years of operations to achieve systems, service and practice change for children and their families in Kakadu.

Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem Final Evaluation - 2013 to 2017
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Photography by Dominic O'Brien and Children's Ground staff.

Designed by Ashleigh Steel

Citation Lorains, J. and Vadiveloo, J. 2019. Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem Final Evaluation - 2013 to 2017
Published by Children's Ground.

Foreword

We were the Co-Directors of Children's Ground in Kakadu West Arnhem for nearly four years. We first met Jane when she came to do the Walk and Talk (community engagement) and we sat down and talked about Children's Ground with many families.

We talked about how we didn't want our wurdurd (children) and our culture to be left behind. We wanted to take our Bininj (Aboriginal) culture and put it in front and following it together, that's what will be good for the wurdurd to follow that path. That's the best thing, straight ahead with our knowledge, not turning to one side here or there. When wurdurd go of in all directions, north, or to the west or east they become confused and lose control, and their lives are ruined and we don't know what is affecting those wurdurd.

Children's Ground collected data from everyone to do evaluation. We all helped collect the numbers and stories about our wurdurd and families because we want to know the story of how we are going. We wanted to know how wurdurd are going in education and health. We wanted to know the good things to come from Bininj jobs and if our communities are getting safer - because this is about our future, the wurdurd are our future.

We began Children's Ground together in Kakadu, we called it 'Wurdurd Garriygarrmerren' which means 'We are all standing together as one family, walking the path with our children'. The wurdurd started to have knowledge in their minds from things they are listening to, passed on to them in speech, Bininj language. They put it into their heads and grew knowledge. There are so many things to teach them about their culture, who they are and how they belong. Just as there is in Bininj and Balanda (Western). And they are in the middle, in the front.

This report presents a story of change. Changes in systems, practices and expectations. Changes for children, families and communities. Change to the status quo.

Our experience in Kakadu showed that First Nations families are waiting for the opportunity to have their voices and aspirations heard and that with the right conditions, whole communities will mobilise behind their children. Our experience was that people living with the most extreme injustice and exclusion are not defined by their disadvantage but by their culture, their identity and talent, and that this driving force is able to shift the future. People want to work, want to lead, want to live in safety and want their children to have the very best in life. Empowerment was a driver for change for children, young people, men, women, families and community. We saw people come together with belief, hope and aspirations for their children and community.

The evaluation of Children's Ground's ambitious change agenda over the first three years of operations covered the implementation of a new way of working - with comprehensive integrated services placed in communities where children lived, that was led by their families and privileged their culture and responded to their trauma and their strengths.

This evaluation shows that while it will take a generation for change to be sustained long-term, that after three and a half years tides can turn. Children previously not engaged in any learning can become confident and engaged learners; those without work histories can become leading employees; those who have never had the opportunity to lead can become change makers.

With Children's Ground our wurdurd were going to school. They really liked it - ready for the bus every morning. Our yawk yawk and yawarinj (young women and men) were working. Our families were together, working for our wurdurd. We worked as Wurdurd Garriyarren to make it safe for our wurdurd to go to school and to learn. We are proud of what we have done. Before there was nothing for our families. Our wurdurd were lost. With Children's Ground they were learning as Bininj people. They were learning Bininj and Balanda ways, just as they wanted. Wurdurd listened to what they were being taught by Bininj and Balanda teachers and families, they kept growing and growing.

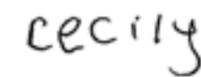
This report tells our story. The story of our families leading Children's Ground in Kakadu. We made these things happen for our wurdurd. Children's Ground is part of us. Part of our community and our families. We know Children's Ground worked. We saw it in our wurdurd. We are always thinking about the future for our wurdurd. We are still going.



Djaykuk Djandjomerr
Traditional Owner, Marlkwao
Co-Director, Children's Ground



May Nango
Traditional Owner, Kakadu
Co-Director, Children's Ground



Cecily Djandjomerr
Traditional Owner, Marlkwao
Co-Director, Children's Ground



Roxanne Naborhborlh
Community Leader, Junkai -
Marlkwao
Children's Ground

It is not easy, and perhaps it is impossible, to tell the whole story. The whole story lives in the daily experiences, the relationships, the hearts and minds of the community, the staff, the funders, the partners. The whole story speaks to the most amazing experiences and the most heartbreaking - it is in the unmeasurable as much as the measurable.

Children's Ground thanks the Mirarr people, the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation and the Kakadu West Arnhem Social Trust for their partnership that made possible such dramatic change over three years and the long-term potential. We thank all of our philanthropic supporters, the Australian Government, corporate partners and donors.

Most importantly we thank the children and the families who are Children's Ground, who inspired and gave life to Children's Ground and who continue to create opportunities for themselves and others.

While we reluctantly ceased operations in Kakadu, the families led us to new places to continue this journey, inspired by the outcomes and determined to create a new future.

Change is possible when you support people with a system that honours them, respects their culture and recognises that their voice must be central to all that happens. Change is possible when you back this with the resources and flexible approach to respond to local priorities, while demanding high quality and meaningful opportunities for learning, wellbeing and development of all children.

Jane Vadiveloo, CEO Children's Ground

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Executive Summary

Photos throughout this report have been approved by community leaders. Please be advised that this report may contain photos of people who are deceased.

Key findings: Change and impact for children, families and community

A new population of children aged 0-5 years engaged in early years learning.

131 children 0-11 years engaged in formal and extended hours learning.

100% of children 4-5 years engaged in formal early learning.

Children in early learning

- 78 children 0-11 years engaged in formal learning.
- 54 children aged 0-5 years engaged in formal early learning.
- In 2014 (year one of operations) 34 children aged 0-5 years engaged in early learning; of these only one had previously accessed early childhood services.
- In partnership with the Jabiru Area School, Children's Ground successfully engaged 100% of children aged 4-5 years in early learning across the region by 2016.
- 24 children 6-11 years engaged in primary school learning at Children's Ground. For these children mainstream education was not meeting their needs.
- 114 children 0-11 years engaged in extended hours learning after school, in the evenings and during school holidays.

ABS Census data supports the finding that Children's Ground has been associated with a large rise in engagement in early childhood education in Kakadu.

"Is gamak [good], the kids learn both ways Bininj [First Nations] and Balanda [Western]. That's how Children's Ground is."

"Bininj kids used to be shy now they are confident to mix with other kids. Children's Ground gave them that confidence. It is a good balance between Bininj and Balanda ways here."
Bininj families, 2017

Family engagement or 'family walking alongside their children' was the headline outcome indicator identified by the community.

100% of children had family engaged directly in their learning and wellbeing.

Family walking alongside their children

- 261 family members (18+ years) actively engaged with their children's learning and wellbeing.
- 91% of community members interviewed reported increased family engagement with their children.
- 90% of local service providers reported Children's Ground had an impact on family engagement in their children's learning and wellbeing.

In addition to active engagement in their children's learning, families were engaged across generations in a range of activities. Almost all parents reported that Children's Ground led to more activities that brought children, young people and families together.

"Lots of changes. Before there was nothing for them. Children's Ground make a lot of changes. Children's Ground go to the families...got them out of the woodworks."

Bininj families, 2017

Weekly, then fortnightly community governance meetings open to everyone.

Bininj Children's Ground Co-Directors.

Bininj cultural governance processes respected and enacted.

Bininj governance and decision making

- 162 people were involved in approximately 170 community governance meetings throughout operations in KWA.
- 80% of families reported that Children's Ground listened to what Bininj wanted.

"Kids and families more happier and everybody joining in and making decisions together."
Bininj families, 2017

"It seemed like everything was coming from the community. Community based and community owned. They've had a direct communication with the community about what they really truly see as important, and what they would actually see adds value to their life as a community."
Local service, 2017

100% of children in formal learning engaged in health promotion including nutrition, ear and dental health, skin health, physical and emotional wellbeing.

Families active in health and emotional wellbeing promotion.

Children and families active in health and wellbeing

- 100% of children engaged in Children's Ground formal learning improved nutritional intake, health behaviours and health knowledge.
- 79-100% of children 0-3 years in the region involved in Children's Ground each year were supported in maternal and child health and wellbeing promotion.
- 373 child primary health assessments undertaken – with supported follow-up.
- 100% of families interviewed reported their children's health as better since Children's Ground started and 86% reported their children's happiness as 'a lot better'.
- In 2016 170 children, young people and adults engaged in social/emotional wellbeing.
- Increased access to clinical and allied health support for young people and adults. From 2015-16, young people and adults were supported to engage with the clinical and allied health services on 765 occasions. Throughout Children's Ground operations and targeted health support, from 2013 to 2016, there was a 44% increase in the percentage of young people and adults engaging in clinical adult health checks at the Jabiru clinic. There were also increases in these health checks across the Territory.

"The fundamentals of Children's Ground sit firmly within global strategies to address accepted social determinants of health...Beyond their overarching systemic interventions, Children's Ground... promotes reflection by services to improve their own mode and standards of delivery."
Dr. Paul Rivalland, GP, Jabiru Clinic, 2016

Employment of 87 local Bininj staff.

A 94% retention rate from 2013-17.

81% of employees not working at the time they commenced with Children's Ground.

Families with employment

- Children's Ground's flexible 'no barriers' approach to employment led to 87 local Bininj people working, most of whom were previously long-term unemployed.
- 74 employees lived in the small communities outside the Jabiru township.
- 81 of 87 Bininj employees actively managed their income through Children's Ground's financial literacy and money management program.
- 72% of families reported that employment enabled people to be role models for children.

ABS Census data shows an increase in the share of Aboriginal people who were employed in the region between 2011 and 2016 that was not part of a broader trend in the NT. At a community level, the high level of Bininj employment changed the status quo. Children's daily experience was adults working – a new norm.

This outcome was significant against a national trend that has seen no improvement in Aboriginal employment outcomes in 10 years of Closing the Gap.

Intergenerational community and learning centre was created as a place of safety, culture and wellbeing by families for three years.

Community and culture coming together

- 332 people of all ages engaged in cultural activities, including on country learning, Bininj Kunborrk, cultural camps and creative arts.
- 100% of children participated in cultural learning alongside their family, from cultural educators and senior cultural teachers.
- 87% of families reported 'more' or 'a lot more' activities for families/community.

"They [children] loved it when they walked with elders. They tell them about land and culture and old time stories. Now they do it lots." (2017)

"Good to see things happen for our young babies, our young kids. Giving them that space, that they can feel happy and loved, you know, safe. They don't have to worry...some of that stuff they never had in their life before...they need it for their growing. It helps them to grow." (2015)
Bininj families, 2015 & 2017

Children's Ground was designed to change the status quo and to radically change the way service systems operate to create opportunity and equity for children devastated by generational exclusion and disadvantage. Designed with First Nations people, the Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is a comprehensive, whole of community approach. Delivered as a place-based platform of prevention it responds to the social and cultural determinants of education, health and wellbeing. It starts by working with children pre-birth to eight years of age and their families, walking with each child, their family and community for a generation to create sustained change.

The CG Approach is a 25-year integrated approach to child, family and community wellbeing achieved through:

- Five systemic areas that create enabling conditions for change: Governance; Employment; Services; Investment; and Evidence.
- An integrated service platform: Learning and Wellbeing; Family Health and Wellbeing; Community Development and Wellbeing; Economic Development and Wellbeing; and Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing.
- Eight practice principles guide how Children's Ground works with the community: Start early; Critical mass (work with everyone); Child, family and community-led; Deliver the whole, not the bits; Innovation - combining the best of the old and the new; Assume and celebrate ability (strengths-based); Expect and deliver excellence; and Stay for the long-term.

Children's Ground operated in Kakadu West Arnhem from October 2013 to June 2017. A partnership with the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC) and the Kakadu West Arnhem (KWA) community was the first implementation of the CG Approach. Collective investment was achieved with Government, philanthropic and community funding. The Children's Ground program ceased in Kakadu West Arnhem on 30 June 2017. The core funding for the program had been provided by the local Mirarr traditional owners via the Kakadu West Arnhem Social Trust, also established by the Mirarr. Due to changed circumstances and priorities, the Mirarr were no longer in a position to fund and support Children's Ground. This occurred following the announcement that the Ranger Uranium mine would be closing. Children's Ground ceased operations three years into a 25-year strategy.

This report presents the impact of three years of operation. This evaluation reports on early change and impact against short-term progress measures towards nine long-term outcomes. Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework articulates nine long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community.

This evaluation drew on findings from: daily program data, government administrative data, ABS data, interviews with families, staff and local services, and data from an independent evaluation conducted by Murdoch Children's Research Institute. The evaluation was overseen by a national Research Advisory Group, consisting of experts in academic, community and systems research and evaluation.

Change and impact for children, families and community

After three years of implementation, evidence showed that Children's Ground achieved significant short-term impact and change for children, families and the KWA community. These were particularly striking in comparison to Northern Territory trends in key Closing the Gap targets in areas where little change has been observed over 11 years¹.

Early stage impact of the CG Approach was evidenced by: engagement in early childhood learning and wellbeing; family engagement in their children's learning and their own wellbeing; employment of long-term unemployed people; improved environments of safety; inclusion and community governance and empowerment.

"Since we began some people have been born, some people have passed away and some have gone down the wrong track. A lot of people are doing really great things. Through all this we have stood together as one family. We have celebrated the joy, shared the pain and helped the people in trouble. Children's Ground has brought us together and strengthened our community. We have shown that we can make big changes. Bininj are ready to take on the challenges that the future will bring us."

Bininj community leader, 2015

The evidence indicates that Children's Ground was able to achieve change in areas which have historically been difficult for the mainstream system to change.

The outcomes analysis indicates that over three years in KWA, children's experiences of life looked different: a majority of children were engaged in early learning; children previously disengaged from primary school were actively engaged with Children's Ground's primary learning; children saw their families employed, many working for the first time; children and families saw their language and culture privileged and revitalised; children saw their families and cultural and community leaders using their voice and being heard; and importantly, the Bininj (First Nations) community felt respected and empowered within the service and systems because they were the decision makers, designers, deliverers and evaluators.



Systems change and impact

This evaluation identified key systems changes that were critical in achieving short-term change and impact. The conditions for change were created by Children's Ground's reform in practice (principles), service delivery and systems. Reform that empowered First Nations people and privileged first language and culture was a primary driver of change.

"I have worked in Arnhem communities for five years prior to coming to Jabiru and not seen a service provider that can provide place-based, evidence-based, community-driven services like Children's Ground does in Kakadu."

Local service, 2017 - as reported in MCRI's evaluation

The systems analysis showed that changing the way of 'doing business' in both 'what' (services) was delivered and 'how' (principles) it was delivered saw Children's Ground respond to global leading practice. Children's Ground frontloaded resources into integrated prevention, community development, culturally responsive education, and health and wellbeing promotion. When combined with relationship development and flexible strengths-based service delivery that built on local agency and ensured local control, this provided the environment for change.

A process analysis demonstrated that the CG Approach was delivered as intended by staff and families in line with the intention of each practice principle. This means that largely, process effectiveness was achieved, albeit not without some challenges in implementation and important learnings for staff and the organisation.

It was found that each area of systems, service and practice reform stimulated reform in each of the other areas - that the interconnectedness was a significant enabler and worked in a range of intersecting ways including:

Community governance and **employment** enabled Bininj culture and first language to be valued, respected and privileged across the **integrated service** platform², and in all Children's Ground environments. It also enabled cultural safety with services and decision-making processes reflecting Bininj values and culture.

Employment led to and was enhanced by children's engagement in learning and intergenerational engagement in governance.

Community governance, employment and a **strengths-based approach** enabled families to become service designers, deliverers and evaluators (**evidence**) and to create the conditions for physical safety across all Children's Ground environments.

The **integrated service** platform enabled families to engage in holistic, responsive, wrap-around support that they could personalise.

The **collective investment** funding model afforded staff the time to build genuine and trusted relationships with families, to be flexible and responsive to family's needs, ideas and decision making, and to take the time required to embed the processes for engagement. It also enabled **integrated service delivery** to prioritise resources for prevention and early intervention.

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2019. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2019

² The integrated service platform includes learning and wellbeing, family health and wellbeing, economic development and wellbeing, community development and wellbeing and cultural development and wellbeing.

The evaluation found that the approach changed the relationship that families had with services. They were not positioned as 'recipients or consumers of services' – they were afforded the right and power to lead the decision making, service delivery and change for their children. The evaluation evidenced that reform in one system area alone would not have created the conditions for process effectiveness - neither would it have achieved the short-term impact for children, families and the community.

A per-person cost analysis in KWA found that the delivery of the CG Approach in KWA was economically effective and efficient. In total, excluding infrequent visitors, the cost of Children's Ground was \$9,881 per person in 2014, increasing over the period of operations in KWA to \$13,192 in 2016. Compared to the per person cost of other well-known early childhood interventions and compared to government expenditure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by the Northern Territory (\$65,000³) and Australian (\$45,000⁴) Governments, the CG Approach is economically efficient. This is not suggesting Children's Ground as a substitute for all current service delivery, but rather it puts the cost of the CG Approach in perspective and balances the cost relative to the impact evidenced throughout this report.

Children's Ground works with communities which have the greatest burden of need and are less likely to be actively engaged in education, health, social and economic services and supports. Cost-effectiveness of the CG Approach was evidenced by the short-term impact and change achieved for children, families and the community. Cost-efficiency was achieved through high quality and effective delivery of a place-based, integrated and prevention focused platform of services that were community-led. The CG Approach has been shown to be an efficient and cost-effective way to achieve real change for children and families who currently face extreme and complex inequity, disadvantage and disempowerment.

While attribution of change from whole of community approach is difficult to determine, particularly within a community setting that is influenced by a range of circumstances, the findings suggest that Children's Ground had a direct, short-term impact on the lives, learning and wellbeing of Bininj children and families in KWA during the three-year period of operations.

Each stakeholder group interviewed (families, staff and local services) identified the CG Approach as the primary contributor to changes observed for children, families and the KWA community over the three years of implementation. The evaluation also showed that Children's Ground was unable to sustain the environment to enable the 25-year approach. Key learnings have been identified to support future sites.

Conclusion

In Kakadu, Children's Ground set out to create the conditions for a different life experience for the current and future generations of children. Over three years, the community was transformed, with children engaged in learning, adults engaged in employment and people across clan groups active in governance, design, delivery and evaluation. Evidence suggests that the CG Approach has the ability to: reform systems; be responsive and effective; empower people; provide services that engage historically excluded and disengaged children and families; and change the status quo.

Changes for children, families and the community were reportedly achieved as a result of the CG Approach being genuinely First Nations led, culturally safe and reflective, and implemented in an integrated manner which responded to the key social and cultural determinants of education, health, wellbeing and life.

This evaluation evidenced that how the CG Approach was implemented significantly influenced and contributed to achieving short-term change and the ability to engage families who have experienced intergenerational inequity and exclusion. It was found that key systems enablers created the conditions for effective implementation of the CG Approach. These systemic conditions included: Bininj-led service design which embedded first language and culture; an intergenerational, whole of family approach (which is also consistent with cultural practices of collectiveness and inclusiveness); resourcing and prioritising relationship development that provided comfortable, safe environments for trusted engagement in service and supports; and Bininj employment, which created cultural safety.

The evaluation evidenced significant positive life changes over a three-year period in a community that has experienced long-term intergenerational stress and complex trauma. For three years, children enjoyed a lived experience of respect for their language and culture, their elders and adults leading change, families working, and early learning as a norm valued by everyone and engaging whole families. Education, health and wellbeing improved for children and families. The evidence confirms that a cultural and strengths-based approach, governed at a local level and resourced with experts in both Balanda (non-First Nations) and Bininj knowledge can achieve change.

The evidence shows that the Children's Ground Approach did effect positive change for children and families over three years and has the potential, if sustained, to achieve long-term outcomes.



Introduction

³ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2017. Indigenous Expenditure Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-december-2017/indigenousexpenditure-report-2017>

⁴ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2017. Indigenous Expenditure Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-december-2017/indigenousexpenditure-report-2017>

Children's Ground vision: "For First Nations families to realise their aspirations for the next generation of children and families to have agency over their social, cultural, political and economic future; where children are raised free from trauma, discrimination and suffering; enjoy equity, dignity and safety, and grow into adulthood feeling happy and able to enjoy their identity, health and wellbeing."

Children's Ground was designed to redress intergenerational and complex disadvantage in Australia. It exists to demonstrate and evidence systems reform to end entrenched inequity and social and economic exclusion within each community with which it works.

The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is a 25-year strategy to achieve systemic and enduring change by addressing the drivers of disadvantage. It starts by working with children pre-birth to eight years of age and walking with each child, their family and their community for a generation.

Kakadu West Arnhem (KWA) in the Northern Territory of Australia was the first place where Children's Ground worked with a community to implement the CG Approach to respond to families' aspirations for their children and their whole community. Locally, Children's Ground was translated into Kunwinjku (local language) and named 'Wurdurd Garriygarrmerren', meaning 'We are all standing together as one family, walking the path with our children'.

This evaluation reports on early outcomes of Children's Ground operations over a three-year period in KWA and progress made towards long-term, 25-year outcomes. It provides a comprehensive evaluation of operations, learnings, change and impact in KWA over the three years.

After briefly describing the Children's Ground Approach and system, this report is presented in two main parts:

Part 1: Change and impact for children, families and community. Evaluation findings of change and impact are presented under key outcome areas of Children, Families and Community, including an analysis and discussion.

Part 2: Systems analysis. A process, systems, cost and contribution analysis. An evaluation of whether or not the CG Approach was implemented as intended, systems enablers and the contribution of the CG Approach on changes evidenced in Part 1.

This is followed by final conclusions about the impact, implementation and effectiveness of Children's Ground in KWA.

The Children's Ground Approach

The Children's Ground Approach (CG Approach) is designed by and for communities experiencing intergenerational inequity and extreme disadvantage - for whom national evidence demonstrates that the current service systems have failed.

The CG Approach has actively reformed key services and systems to redress the failings of current systems. It is an in-community approach, implementing a bottom-up system, directed and delivered by First Nations people to achieve long-term impact and sustained change. Children's Ground is evidencing this new approach.

Children's Ground responds to the key social, economic and cultural determinants for lifelong opportunity and wellbeing - focusing on prevention, excellence and empowerment. This 25-year approach starts with children pre-birth to eight years. Implementation of the CG Approach is phased - as children grow, Children's Ground grows with them and their families until they reach adulthood.

Children's Ground is informed by cultural knowledge and practices, as well as Western international and national evidence and leading practice - cultural knowledge and Western knowledge are equally valued in practice and strategy.



What services are delivered

On the ground in communities, the CG Approach delivers the following services, referred to as the integrated 'Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform' (LWD platform). The platform recognises that an early start in education, personalised education, health and wellbeing, safety, a healthy family and community environment, cultural identity and economic wellbeing are all critical foundations to a child doing well in life. The LWD platform is a system that integrates five key areas of service, support and empowerment:



Learning and Wellbeing:
Early childhood learning, innovative schooling, after-school and holiday programs and extra-curricular learning and wellbeing

Learning and Wellbeing (education): starting with a focus on early years learning in first language and English, with First Cultural and English/Western learning occurring on country and at the intergenerational community centre. As children grow, learning grows with them to include primary and secondary school education, and post-secondary vocational training.



Family Health and Wellbeing:
Health promotion, social and emotional wellbeing, child and maternal health, nutrition, environmental health

Family Health and Wellbeing (physical, cultural, social and emotional, and environmental health): health promotion and prevention, nutrition, environmental health and support to access clinical health services, social and emotional wellbeing and traditional healing. Delivery focuses on maternal, child and family health, health literacy and health agency.



Economic Development and Wellbeing:
Employment, training, mentoring, financial literacy, enterprise development

Economic Development and Wellbeing (employment, training and enterprise): a local workforce, a curriculum and learning platform designed for future employment, support for transition to work, micro-financing and enterprise development.



Community Development and Wellbeing:
Local governance, safety, community development, social and cultural capital, celebration

Community Development and Wellbeing (society, governance, culture and environment): provision of integrated and intergenerational community/family centres where services are delivered. These centres promote and deliver community safety, community governance and the building of social, cultural and economic capital where people live.



Creative and Cultural Development and Wellbeing:
Creative and cultural knowledge and practice

Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing (embedded across all areas): Embedded in learning, health, employment and community development, cultural knowledge systems and creative thinking are central to operations. They ensure children grow with a strong sense of identity and belonging with the knowledge systems and skills of their first cultures and languages. They also ensure children grow as creative thinkers, with flexible and adaptive skills to engage in a global environment with confidence.

The LWD platform is a full system of services that are the requisite foundations of prevention and empowerment. To respond to the multi-level influences on children's development and life from pre-birth to 25 years, the CG Approach is delivered with genuine integration - it is not hindered by siloed funding streams and delivery. Content and delivery are individualised and tailored for each child, family and community to ensure children are equipped to enter adulthood confident and economically independent in local and global environments.

How services are delivered

The CG Approach creates environments that are enablers, rather than barriers, to access and engagement. Delivery is guided by key practice principles.

The eight principles outlined in Figure 1 ensure the CG Approach puts children at the centre and is led by community. It ensures the CG Approach is high-quality, strengths-based, place-based, integrated, intergenerational, inclusive, long-term and responsive.

Designed as a whole of community approach, Children's Ground seeks to engage and walk with the majority, 'a critical mass' (75%), of children within a community. The assumption is that if a critical mass of children enjoys high quality education, positive health and wellbeing and equity in life opportunities into adulthood - whole communities currently experiencing intergenerational disadvantage can shift to communities that experience wellbeing and opportunity.

What services are delivered is important, however, how they are delivered is what can lead to engagement, empowerment and sustained change and impact.

Figure 1: Children's Ground Practice Principles⁵



Enabling systemic conditions – systems reform

Children's Ground grew out of decades of work with and by First Nations people – learning from years of experience with what works and what doesn't. An important learning from practice and research evidence⁶ is that key systemic conditions are required to empower people to lead and sustain change.

How the CG Approach creates the conditions for change is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Children's Ground systems reform

	Current System	Children's Ground
1. Governance	Top down	Bottom up
2. Service Delivery	Crisis response and delivered in silos	Preventative and integrated
3. Workforce	Short-term; outsiders	Local and long-term
4. Investment	Short-term, project based	Long-term, collective, at scale
5. Evidence	Outputs based (what and how many)	Outcomes based (impact) First Nations led

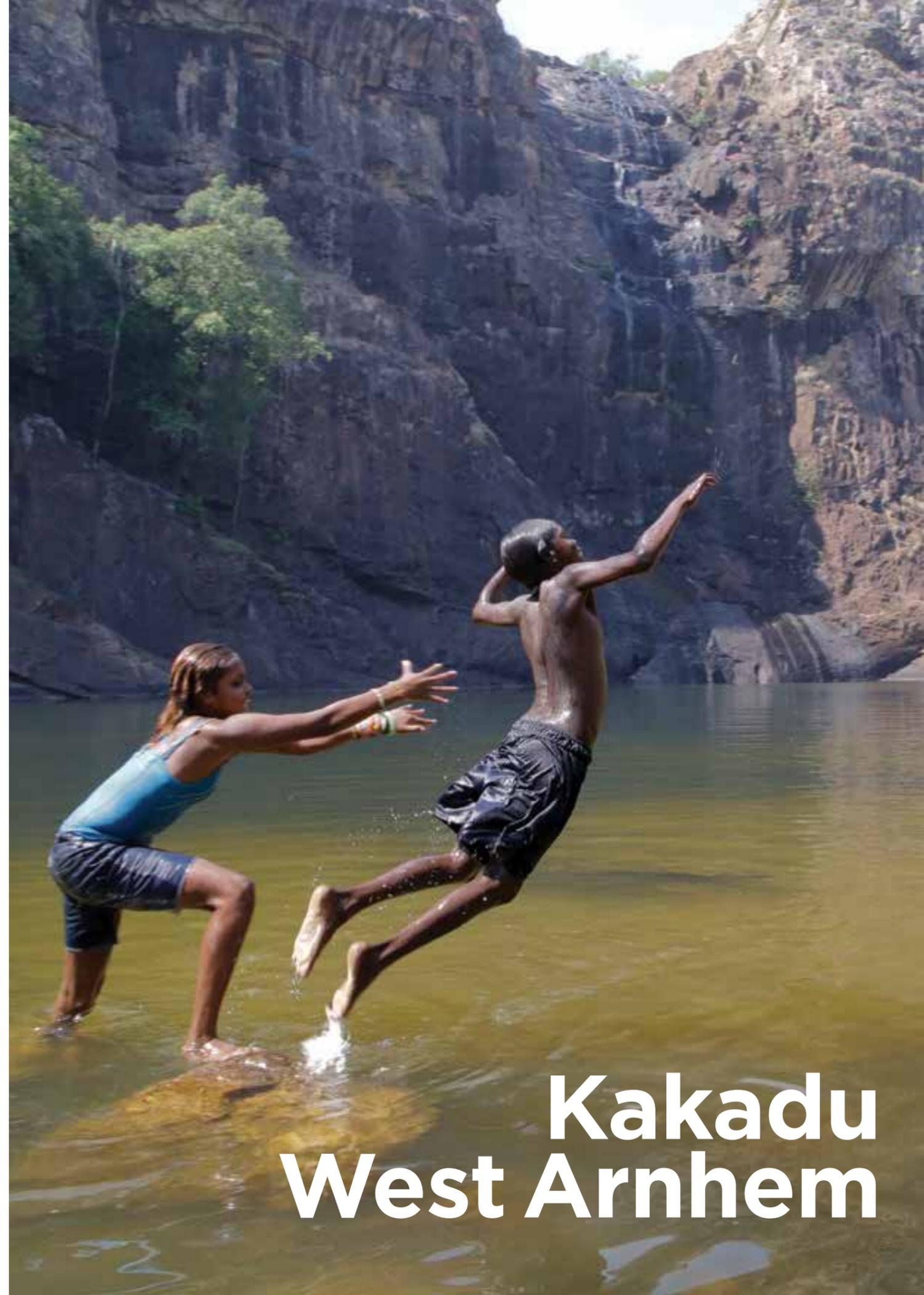
- A dual Governance system ensures that corporate governance is balanced with local cultural governance. Day to day decision making is in the hands of community through **community cultural governance** led by elders. This is supported by **Western governance** through a board with deep experience in corporate governance.
- Implementing the holistic **integrated service platform (the LWD platform)** that reflects cultural life and integrates learning and wellbeing, family health and wellbeing, cultural development and wellbeing, economic development and wellbeing and community empowerment.
- A quality and responsive workforce that combines cultural expertise with content experts in each area.

Local employment is a centrepiece and is enabled through a unique, flexible 'no barriers' approach to **employment and workforce**. A long-term strategy for the new generation to be the economically independent workforce in the region for the future.

- Innovative funding partners who, as part of a **collective investment model**, are committed to funding long-term outcomes rather than short-term outputs alone - enabling scale, excellence, innovation and flexibility to deliver change.
- Longitudinal evaluation from the outset that is oversights by a national Research Advisory Group and is co-designed and led by First Nations people on the ground to build the **evidence** and evaluate the impact of the CG Approach.

⁵In 2018 a ninth principle was added: 'In community' (place-based). Previously this was implicit in the principle of 'Child, Family & Community led'.

⁶Productivity Commission, 2017, Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services, Report No. 85, Canberra.



Kakadu West Arnhem

Kakadu West Arnhem

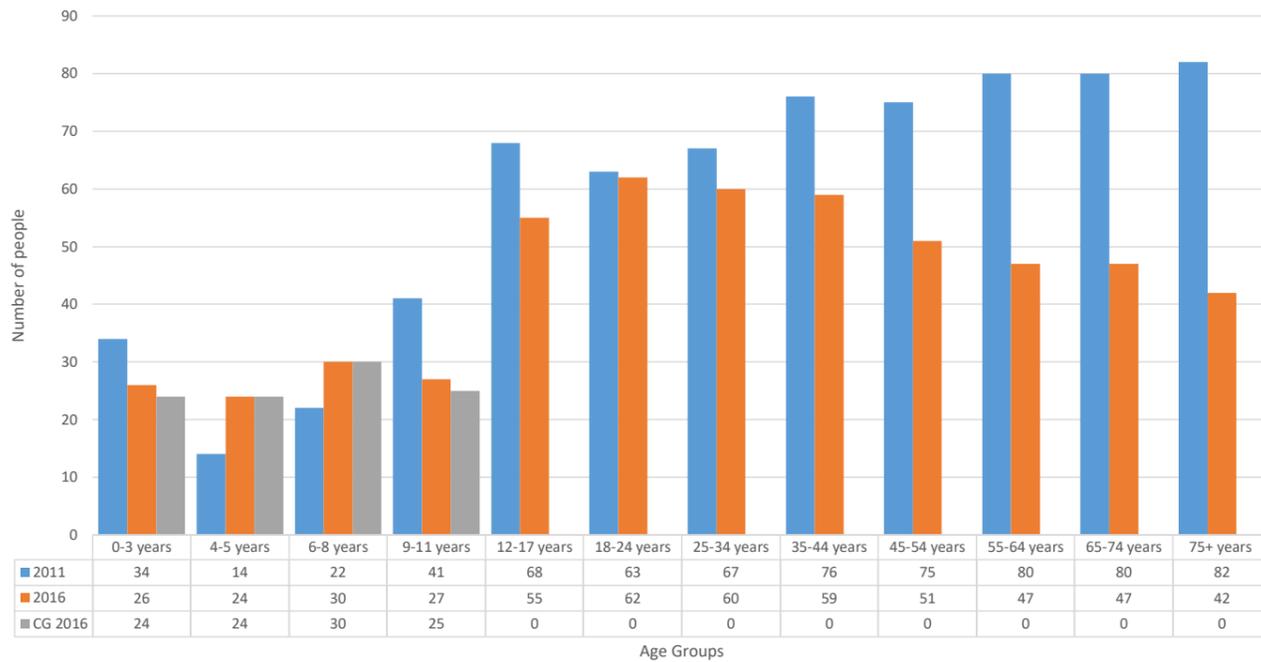
About the community

Kakadu is located approximately 200 kilometres from Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia. Kakadu is home to a number of traditional owner groups as well as other Bininj (First Nations) people who have been living in the region over many years, but with no traditional ownership of the land. Traditional owners have maintained connections to their land through their rights of custodianship and continued cultural practices. Today, only three languages (or their dialects) remain spoken on a regular basis: Kunwinjku, Gundjeihmi and Jawoyn. From the 2016 national census, the estimated population of the Kakadu National Park area and the Jabiru Township was 1,393⁷. Of this population, 427 - just over 30% - identified as Aboriginal.

Graph 1 shows the population distribution by age groups, drawn from the 2011 and 2016 ABS census^{8,9} and Children's Ground's internal 2016 census of children aged 0-11 years, including those identified as permanent residents and frequent visitors across the Kakadu West Arnhem region. The ABS and Children's Ground census for 2016 were largely aligned.



Graph 1: 2011 and 2016 KWA Indigenous population distribution (ABS^{10,11} and Children's Ground)



See Appendix one for a detailed map of the Kakadu West Arnhem region.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2016. Census population distribution

⁸ Between 2011 and 2016 the ABS made changes geographic boundary changes. These do not impact the overall geographic area being analysed by Children's Ground.

⁹ Due to changes in randomisation processes the comparison of the 2016 and 2011 census results should be seen as providing only a rough estimate of the changes that have occurred in the KWA area. However, in 2016 Children's Ground staff made significant efforts in supporting people to complete the ABS Census.

¹⁰ Includes those that identify as Aboriginal. Includes data for the following SA1 statistical areas 7105701,7105705, 7105706, 7105707, 7105712, 7105715,7105717

¹¹ Person Count: Estimated Resident Population by Place of Usual Residence. The Census does not collect data for all Australians - therefore care is required when using the Census counts to make inferences about the number of people who live in a particular location.

Children's Ground in KWA

In 2013, Children's Ground's first community partnership was established with the Bininj people of Kakadu West Arnhem. This was enabled through a formal partnership with one clan group in the region, the Mirarr people, through their organisation, the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC). The Mirarr are the Traditional Owners of Jabiru, the Ranger Uranium mine and some of the north-east area of Kakadu National Park. Through monies paid from the Ranger Uranium Mine, GAC established the Kakadu West Arnhem Social Trust (KWA) to benefit the whole Kakadu region. KWA supported and funded Children's Ground to achieve long-term social, cultural and economic development, for the benefit of all Bininj communities in the region. Coupled with funding secured from the Australian Government and early-stage philanthropic supporters, Children's Ground began operations in KWA with a rare funding model of collective investment. From the outset, this enabled a focus on innovation and prevention to achieve long-term outcomes rather than short-term, crisis response outputs.

The core funding for the program had been provided by the local Mirarr traditional owners via the Kakadu West Arnhem Social Trust, also established by the Mirarr. In 2017, due to changed circumstances and priorities, the Mirarr were no longer in a position to fund and support Children's Ground. This occurred following the announcement that the Ranger Uranium mine would be closing.

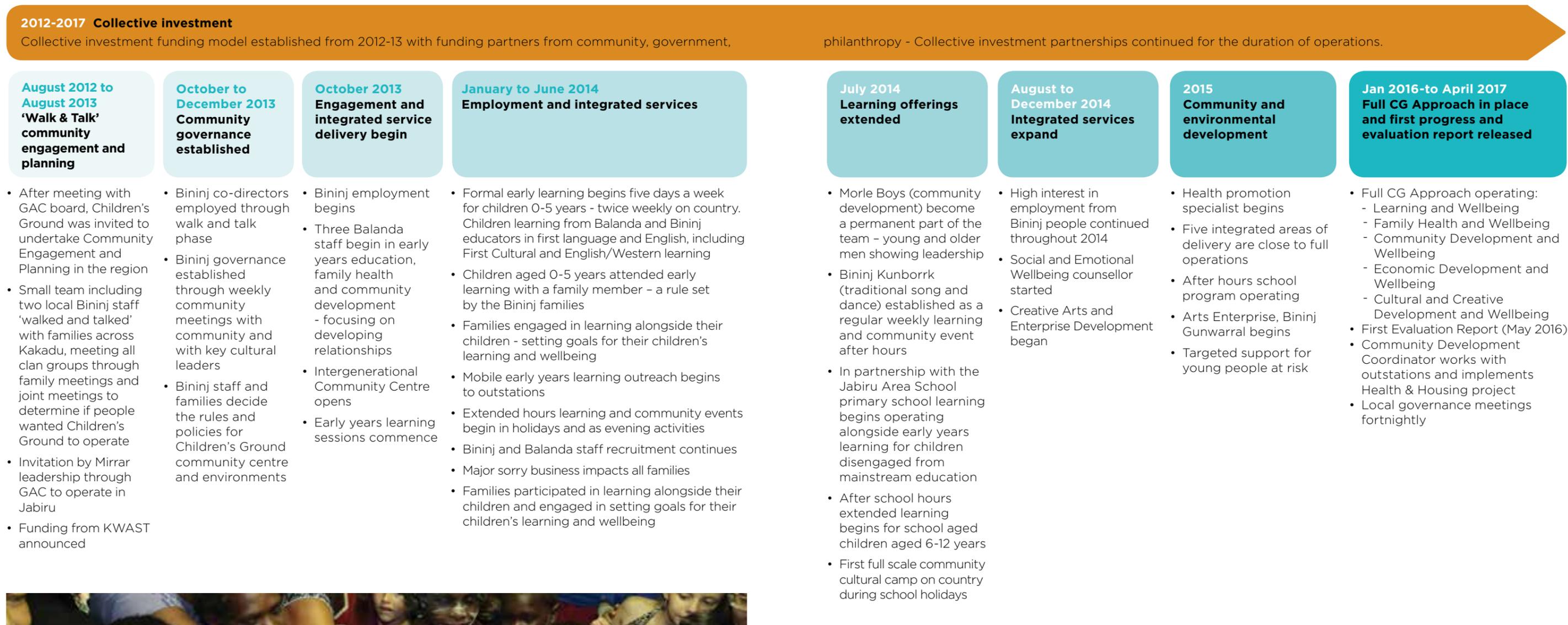
Children's Ground commenced operations formally in January 2014. The first years of Children's Ground implementation aimed to establish a foundation for long-term change for all Bininj people in the region, with a particular focus on outstations outside of Jabiru and communities facing the greatest exclusion and hardship.

The first two years of Children's Ground were described as 'building the ship and sailing at the same time'. With a participatory approach to practice and evaluation, implementation and operations were about process as much as activity. Bininj and Balanda (non-First Nations) staff were recruited, community governance was established, and operational processes, policies and programs were being developed with the community while delivery was being implemented. Understanding the complex cultural governance structures and processes required to work with a range of traditional owner groups and lands was a focus in the early period of operations.

Figure 3 depicts how implementation of the CG Approach unfolded in KWA, beginning with community engagement and planning and moving into stage one operations of the CG Approach.



Figure 3: Children's Ground KWA implementation timeline



Children's Ground experienced some unanticipated challenges and limitations to full implementation from the outset, including availability of housing for staff, recruitment of high quality staff and the need to constantly balance the number of Bininj and Balanda staff to ensure Bininj leadership and governance were not overpowered and compromised.

From early 2015, many of the initial challenges were addressed. Staff and operations were settling; processes and delivery were becoming routine. 2016 was a year of consolidation and stabilisation, with established processes and routines embedded and momentum continuing to build in terms of child and family engagement and participation in learning, health, wellbeing and employment.

From January to May 2017:

- Early learning continued at the community centre, on country and mobile outreach learning.
- Children aged 4+ years were supported to transition to Jabiru Area School.
- People were supported to seek other employment locally.
- Final evaluation interviews were undertaken with families, staff and local services.
- A final celebration with community took place.

Further descriptions of services, delivery and the CG Approach in KWA are included in relevant sections throughout the report.



About this evaluation

This evaluation covers the three-year period in which Children's Ground was operational in KWA - from January 2014 to December 2016¹².

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation has ethics approval from the Top End Human Ethics Research Committee of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research. The evaluation in KWA was overseen by a national Research Advisory Group, consisting of experts in academic, community and systems research and evaluation (see Appendix three for the Research Advisory Group's endorsement of this evaluation).

Outcomes and indicators

Children's Ground's evaluation framework has nine long-term outcomes for children, their families and the community, outlined in Figure 4. Progress indicators are attached to each outcome to measure change and impact over three years of implementation. Headline progress indicators are used throughout this report to evidence where progress and change did and did not occur.



Figure 4: KWA outcomes evaluation framework

Aspiration	Outcomes
Children are thriving - engaged in life, brimming with laughter, pride, confidence and opportunities.	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 20%;">Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 20%;">Children are healthy</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 20%;">Children know their history and feel confident in their cultures</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 20%;">Children are happy</div> </div>
Families feeling strong, supported and confident about their children's future; feel valued and are involved in their children's learning, wellbeing and development.	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 60%;">Families are involved in their children's learning, wellbeing and development</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 40%;">Families are socially and economically strong</div> </div>
Communities care for each other and provide a safe environment for every child. They enjoy economic, cultural and social strength and opportunity.	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 30%;">The community values its place and heritage and continues to grow</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 30%;">The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 30%;">The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity</div> </div>

Long-term change is expected when the generation of children growing up with Children's Ground are young adults and become the critical mass of families who have experienced positive education, health and wellbeing from their earliest years, and have built agency to enjoy social and economic opportunities. Process indicators and short-term impact indicators were measured to determine change over the first three years of operations - as the building blocks for long-term change.

Method

This evaluation asked the overarching question: *What is the difference Children's Ground has made in Kakadu West Arnhem?* To understand impact and the drivers of change, it was then asked:

- During the period of Children's Ground operations,
 - What change and impact occurred in KWA community?
 - What systems, service and practice change occurred in KWA?
- Was the CG Approach implemented as intended?
- How did the CG Approach contribute to any change?

The evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative data and a participatory action research mixed-method approach for data collection.

As part of this final evaluation, Children's Ground contracted the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) as an external evaluator to undertake a small process evaluation to examine how Children's Ground was implemented compared with what was initially intended. Data from the independent evaluation has been included in this evaluation report to contribute to the evaluation of the CG Approach and implementation integrity.

Quantitative and qualitative information gathered from 2014 to 2017 includes:

- Internal administrative data represents 431 participants who have identified as Bininj or First Nations (331 permanent residents or frequent visitors and 100 infrequent visitors).
- Sixty-nine Bininj and Balanda people participated in structured and semi structured face-to-face evaluation interviews (46 Bininj family/community members, 13 Balanda staff, 10 local service providers from six services).
- Nineteen Children's Ground staff (Bininj and Balanda) and 12 local service providers also completed an anonymous online questionnaire - administered by MCRI, as part of an independent survey¹³.
- External data including ABS Census, NT Government Departments of Education, Health, Police, Fire and Emergency.

Data presented throughout this report represents permanent residents of, and frequent visitors to, the KWA region, unless stated otherwise. See Appendix two for relevant data notes, including population definitions. Appendix two also outlines challenges and limitations of some data related to both the internal (Children's Ground) and external (MCRI) evaluations.

Throughout the report, engagement data is presented by various age groups. This is based on the intended focus age group for elements of the CG Approach and age-appropriate engagement.

Bininj family and community voices (quotes) are presented throughout this report as evidence. This is part of Children's Ground's commitment to ensuring that Bininj voices and perspectives are privileged and accurately represented.

Through Participatory Action Research (PAR), local Bininj people were involved in monitoring and evaluation from the outset including design, data collection, analysis and reporting. Across the first (2015) and final (2017) evaluation waves, approximately 20 Bininj Community Researchers were trained and involved in monitoring and evaluation.



¹² From January 2017 Children's Ground operations were focused on closure by June 30 and transition support for children, families and Bininj employees. 2017 data is only included throughout this report within this context and where program delivery was not significantly disrupted by the changed circumstances.

¹³ There were incomplete responses across both staff and service surveys. Survey data is reported using the number of respondents to each question as the denominator.



Part One:
Change and impact
for children, families
and community

Key Findings: What change and impact occurred in KWA community?

“All my years that I been here in Kakadu, I didn’t see changes like Children’s Ground.”

Bininj family member, 2017

After three years of implementation, evaluation evidence showed that Children’s Ground achieved short-term impact and change for children, families and the KWA community. The outcomes analysis indicates that children experienced new life opportunities during Children’s Ground’s operations.

Changes for children		
Engagement of a critical mass of children in early learning - and a new cohort who had never previously participated	Increased access to and engagement in First Cultural and English/Western learning, with children making positive progress in both	Increased engagement in health and wellbeing promotion, specifically nutrition and physical health (skin, ears, eyes)
Changes for families		
Widespread employment and retention of long-term unemployed local Bininj families	Families actively engaging with their children - walking alongside their children in culture, learning, health and wellbeing	Improved access to health promotion, planning and early intervention for their children and family
Changes for community		
Increased Bininj voice and leadership - genuine Bininj-led decision making and governance	Creating and improving environments of safety and wellbeing for children and families	Strengthened social and cultural capital, which included an increased expression of cultural life

These findings, coupled with others presented throughout this report, demonstrate that change is achievable, even in the short-term.

Evidence indicates that changes were achieved as a result of the Children’s Ground Approach being genuinely First Nations led, culturally safe and reflective, and implemented in an integrated manner which responded to all the social and cultural determinants of health, wellbeing and life.

This section outlines all changes reported and evidenced throughout the evaluation, under each long-term outcome and short-term progress measure.



Change and impact for children

Children’s Ground’s longitudinal evaluation framework identified four key outcome areas for children:

- Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers
- Children know their history and feel confident in their culture
- Children are healthy
- Children are happy

These reflect the desire of families for their children to be happy, healthy and knowledgeable in their first culture and language, and in Western and global knowledge.



Children have the knowledge and skills for life and learning and are creative problem solvers

KEY FINDINGS

- A new population of children aged 0-5 years engaged in formal early childhood learning
- A critical mass (75%) of children aged 0-5 years across the region engaged with formal early childhood learning at Children’s Ground
- 80 children aged 0-11 years actively engaged in early years and primary school learning with Children’s Ground - these children were previously disengaged from early and primary learning

Children’s development in their early years of life directly impacts their lifelong social, education, health and economic wellbeing.^{14,15} The 2018 Closing the Gap data demonstrates that the Northern Territory is the only national jurisdiction not on track to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children engaging with preschool. The data shows that approximately 90% of Indigenous children are enrolled in preschool, however, in 2016 only 30% were recorded as attending at or above Universal Access levels, compared with approximately 75% of non-Indigenous children in the NT¹⁶.

Starting Early is a key principle of Children’s Ground, providing every child with opportunity from pre-birth to adulthood. This is considered critical in preventing and redressing entrenched disadvantage.

¹⁴ Silburn SR, Nutton G, Arney F, Moss B. 2011. *The First 5 Years: Starting Early*. Topical paper commissioned for the public consultations on the Northern Territory Early Childhood Plan. Darwin: Northern Territory Government; OECD. 2017. *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*. Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276116-en>.

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2012. Early learning programs that promote children’s developmental outcomes. Resource Sheet No. 15. August <http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2012/ctgc-rsl15.pdf> Accessed 26 June 2014

¹⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2018. Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2018.

Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

The following progress indicators were used to measure change and impact in relation to children's learning and wellbeing:

- Engage a critical mass (75%) of children in high-quality early learning and wellbeing environments.
- Increased regular engagement of children in learning.
- Children are progressing in their early childhood learning and development (First Cultural and English/Western learning).

Children's Ground's approach to learning and wellbeing includes multiple layers that incorporate both English/Western and First Cultural learning in formal and informal learning environments.

Formal and informal learning

Figure 5 shows the three levels of learning engagement used at Children's Ground. The inner circles are formal learning and consist of engagement in a structured learning environment of early years and primary learning. The next level is extended hours learning, which includes after school learning and school holiday programs. This extended the hours in which learning could occur (e.g. cultural learning, homework support and tutoring) and provided children with extra-curricular opportunities that promoted skills development and learning in other domains (e.g. sport, arts, music). The third level, informal learning, includes Children's Ground activities that engaged children and families and also provided an environment for social and cultural development and wellbeing through community events.

Together, all three levels provided different entry points for engagement into formal learning and built a culture of learning that was valued and present across the community. In turn, this aimed to build on the social and cultural economy of the community through their focus on learning and wellbeing for their children.

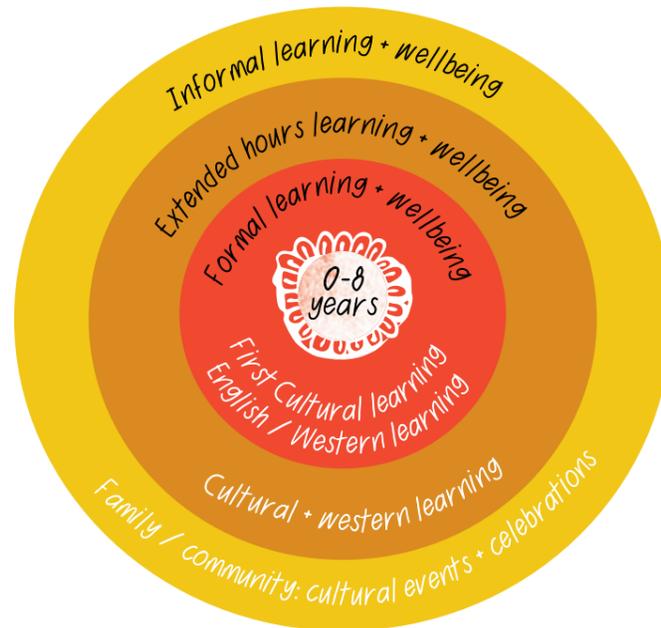
English/Western and First Cultural learning

As part of Children's Ground's commitment to a contemporary, global and culturally responsive learning system, learning outcomes relate to the two key knowledge systems informing children's learning and wellbeing:

- **English/Western learning skills and knowledge** which includes age appropriate knowledge and skills aligning with the National Early Years Learning Framework as well as primary learning development in English language, literacy and numeracy, digital and creative skills.
- **First Cultural learning skills and knowledge** which includes age appropriate knowledge and skills in land/country, language, kinship and other cultural knowledge systems and practices.

From here, this section presents evaluation findings and evidence around access to and engagement in formal early learning, primary school learning and extended hours learning (after school, evenings and holiday programs) - the two inner circles from Figure 5 - presented across two age ranges, 0-5 years and 6-11 years. It also evidences progress in Western and Cultural learning and highlights which areas of service, practice and system reform were drivers of change and impact in children's engagement and learning.

Figure 5: Children's Ground learning

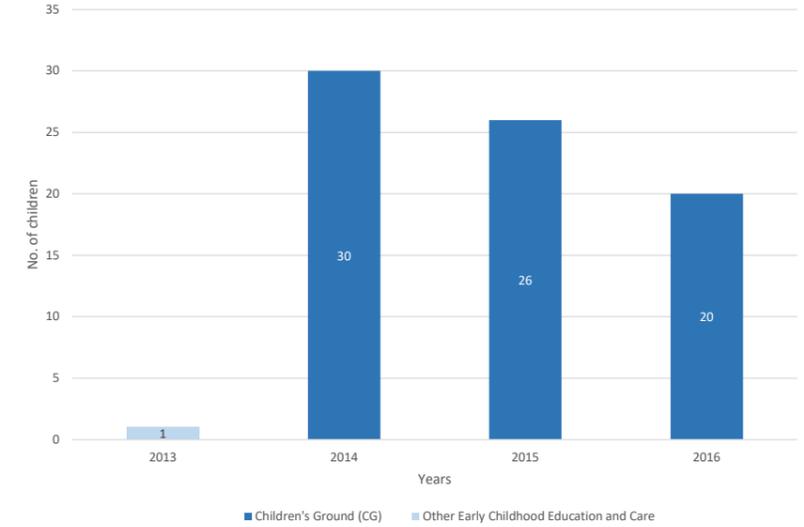


Formal learning and wellbeing - Children aged 0-5 years

Stage one of CG operations in Kakadu was focused on achieving access to high quality, age-appropriate early childhood learning for children aged 0-5 years across the region. Children's Ground increased access to early learning across the region with daily formal early years learning at the community centre as well as outstation visits from the mobile early years team.

Prior to Children's Ground operations, there was a cohort of children who were not accessing formal early learning due to both geographic and cultural isolation. In 2013, families reported that only one child aged 0-3 years had engaged in any early learning programs. Children's Ground's internal data set shows that from 2014 onwards, a new cohort of children aged 0-3 years engaged in early learning for the first time.

Graph 2: Number of children 0-3 years old engaged in early learning - CG internal dataset

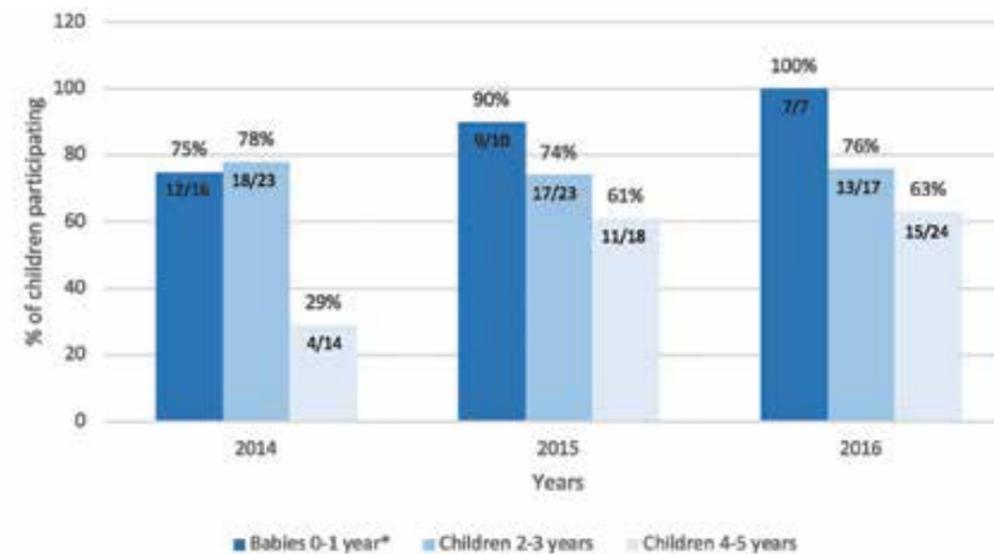


Engagement of children aged 4-5 years began slowly, with Children's Ground engaging those who were not attending the local preschool and child care programs. From 2014 to 2016, engagement of children 4-5 years of age in Children's Ground early learning grew. Over the three years, in partnership with the local Jabiru Area School (JAS), 100% of children aged 0-5 years were engaged in either the JAS preschool, Children's Ground early learning or both.

In total from 2014-2016, Children's Ground engaged 56 children aged 0-5 years in formal early learning. In 2014, the first year of full operations, this included engaging 34 Bininj children 0-5 years - 22 of these children lived in communities outside of Jabiru and a further five lived in a Town Camp on the outskirts of Jabiru. Thirty-three children had not previously attended early learning before Children's Ground - this shows that Children's Ground enabled engagement of a new cohort of children in early learning.

Graph 3 shows the number and percentage of children engaged in age-appropriate early learning with Children's Ground and that across most age groups, the percentage of children engaged grew over time.

Graph 3: Number and percentage of children aged 0-5 years engaged with Children's Ground formal early learning



*For babies aged 0-1 year and their families, age-appropriate engagement included participation in any element of the Children's Ground integrated service platform; learning, health, community and cultural events.

Children's Ground achieved engagement of a critical mass (defined as 75+%) of children aged 0-3 years (78%) from 2014-16 and in each full year of operations. Of the 4-5 year olds, 63% were engaged at Children's Ground by 2016 and internal records showed that, when combined with attendance at JAS, 100% of engagement was achieved in Kakadu.

Children's Ground was denied access to 2016 de-identified enrolment and attendance data by the Northern Territory Department of Education and was therefore unable to present by year population level data to understand any change between 2013 and 2016 in the region for children aged 4-6 years.

National ABS Census data^{17/18} on preschool attendance supports the finding that Children's Ground has been associated with a large rise in engagement in early childhood education.

For Kakadu West Arnhem, Census data shows that:

- Excluding Jabiru Township, in 2011 there were no four year old children attending either preschool or school. By 2016, three quarters of all Aboriginal children aged four years were attending either preschool or school.
- Including Jabiru, only half of all Aboriginal children aged four years were attending preschool in 2011. By 2016, over 90% were attending.

Furthermore, according to Census data:

- Excluding Jabiru Township, all children five years of age were attending either preschool or school in both 2011 and 2016.
- Including Jabiru, in 2011 only 30% of all Aboriginal children five years of age were attending preschool or school while in 2016, all were attending either preschool or school.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Engage a critical mass (75%) of children in high-quality early learning and wellbeing environments

To create significant change at a population level, engaging a majority or 'critical mass' of children and their families in Children's Ground was a key principle. The premise was that, if a new generation of children across a community (a critical mass) enjoyed a life of opportunity and quality learning, this would set the foundation for generational change across the community.

Graph 3 on the previous page shows that Children's Ground engaged a critical mass of children in each age group in each year of operation (with the exception of 74% of children 2-3 years in 2015). For children aged 4-5 years, a percentage also attended the Jabiru Area School. Shared/Joint internal data showed that, in partnership with the school, a critical mass of children attended formal early years learning.

Formal learning and wellbeing - Children aged 6-11 years

The first three years of Children's Ground implementation (stage one) aimed to formally engage children aged 0-5 years and their families in early learning. During this period, however, both the JAS and families identified a small group of primary school aged children either not engaging or having difficulty at the school. Following discussions with families, Children's Ground employed a primary school teacher in the second half of 2014 and, in partnership with the school, a shared agreement was established whereby Children's Ground engaged and taught a small cohort of primary school aged children.

For these children who had been chronically disengaged from education, support was intensive. They engaged in the Children's Ground learning environment, which worked with them to respond to their individual learning needs. This was made possible through a partnership with the Jabiru Area School. For some children, engagement required multiple adults, including Balanda teachers, Bininj teachers, family members and special transport. Table 1 shows the number of children aged 6-11 years engaged in formal primary school learning at Children's Ground, from 2014 to 2016.

Table 1: Number of children aged 6-11 years engaged with Children's Ground formal learning

	2014	2015	2016
Children 6-8 years	12	12	11
Children 9-11 years	4	1	10

In 2016, the number of children aged 6-11 years engaged with Children's Ground learning increased from 13 in 2015 to 21 in 2016. This increase related to children beginning in early childhood and as they aged, entering formal primary learning at Children's Ground.

ABS Census data shows that across Kakadu West Arnhem (excluding Jabiru Township), between 2011 and 2016, there was a small increase of 4.5% in the proportion of children aged 5-12 years attending primary school¹⁹, and a larger increase of 14.5% when including Jabiru in the data. These data suggest that, in partnership, Children's Ground and the Jabiru Area School have been able to work with children and families to increase engagement in primary school learning.

Through this partnership, one child moved from nearly zero attendance in school in 2014 to 91% (term 1) and 68% (term 2) attendance at Jabiru Area School in 2016. During this period in 2015, he attended both Children's Ground's mobile learning and primary class and JAS with an individualised learning and wellbeing strategy supported by Children's Ground.

Extended hours learning

In addition to early childhood and primary learning, Children's Ground provided extended hours learning opportunities for children after school and during school holidays. Recognising that a common experience for Bininj children can be disengagement from school following holiday periods, and that after school can be a time when children are looking for additional activities, extended hours learning aimed to provide access to learning activities for children aged 6-8 years, but also catered for children aged 9-11 and young children.

Across all years, family-based school holiday programs and camps were also run. Holiday camps began in 2014 and after school hours activities started in 2015. Table 2 shows the number of children engaged with extended hours learning over each year. This included after hours learning, school holiday programs, family cultural camps and Bininj Kunborrk (traditional dance) evenings.

Table 2: Number and percentage of children engaged with extended hours learning, by year

	2014	2015	2016
Children 6-11 years	24 of 45 (53%)	43 of 51 (84%)	41 of 55 (75%)

These data demonstrate that Children's Ground built towards and achieved a critical mass of children aged 6-11 years in extended hours learning environments.

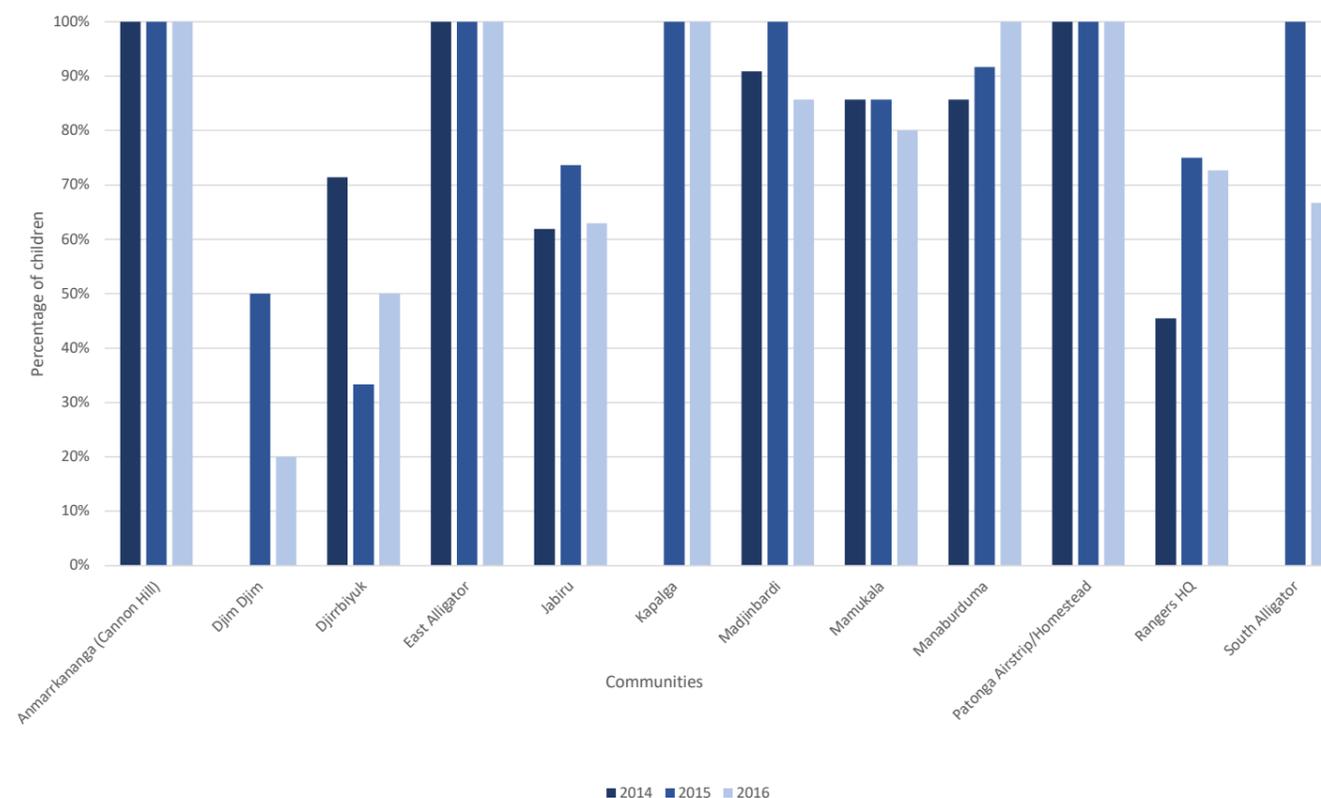
Engaging children aged 0-8 years from across the region

Achieving whole of community change over a generation required engaging children across the region. With a diverse geographic region and multiple clan groups, inclusion was a key measure for Children's Ground. A primary focus was engaging children in outstations facing the greatest barriers to access and engagement.

From 2014 to 2016, Children's Ground engaged close to a critical mass of children from communities across the region, with some exceptions. The area of Kakadu National Park is 20,000km² with small populations throughout the park. Each area is associated with different clan groups and cultural authority.

Graph 4 shows the percentage of children from the population of children in each community engaging in Children's Ground formal and extended hours learning environments. In cases where no engagement is evident, there were no children recorded as living in these communities in these years.

Graph 4: Percentage of children 0-8 years engaged in formal and extended hours learning by community



¹⁷ The COAG target to have 95 per cent of Indigenous four year old children enrolled in early childhood education is monitored through the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection. The quality of this collection has improved over time and as a result, data for 2016 are not comparable to data for earlier years. In addition, data from this collection are not available for small areas. As a result, the NECECC cannot be used to assess the impact of Children's Ground.

¹⁸ Some care is required in using these data as four and five year old children can attend either preschool or infants/primary school thus looking at the preschool data in isolation can be misleading.

¹⁹ ABS. 2016. Early childhood engagement

Increasing attendance over time

Once engagement with a critical mass of children was achieved, the next target was to increase the regularity of children's participation.

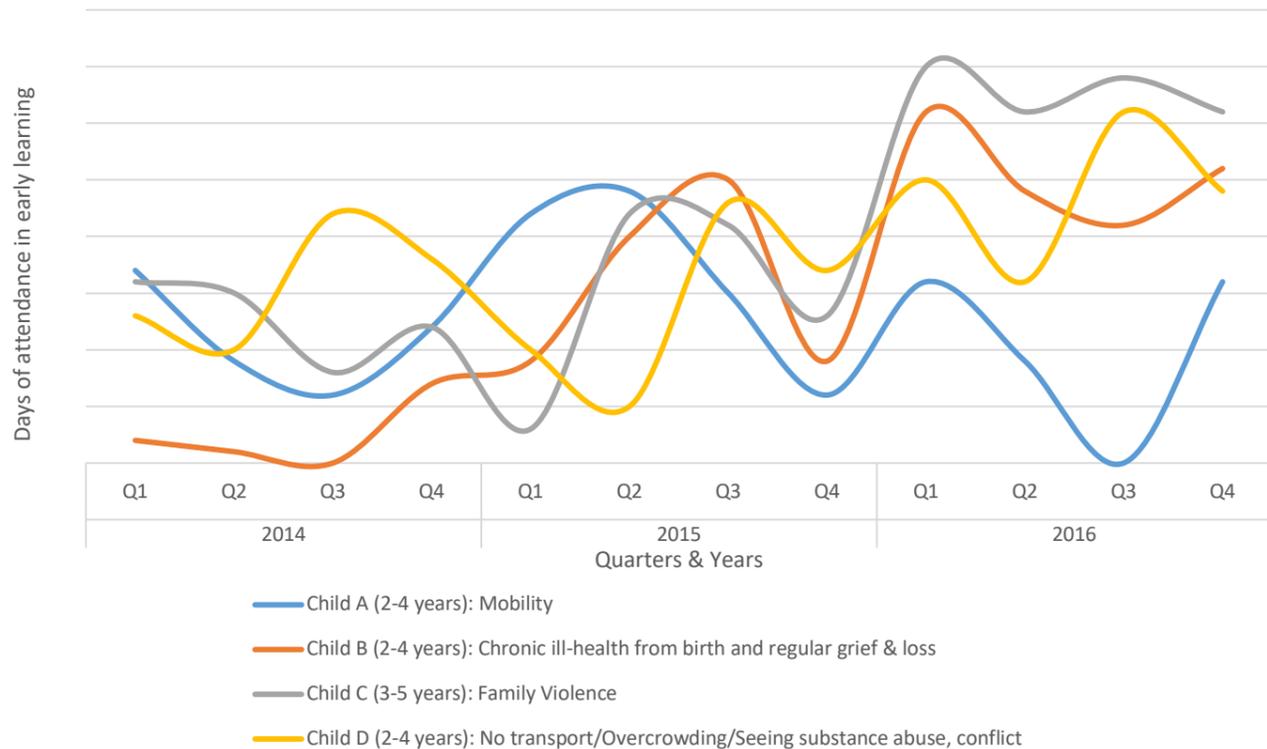
Many families across KWA were living with daily factors and circumstances which influenced regularity of participation in learning for children and their families. Children's Ground recognised this from the outset, therefore the CG Approach sought to support families in all facets of life through integrated service delivery.

There were a range of factors impacting child and family participation in learning at a community level. Key factors such as grief and loss, community conflict and royalty payments were prevalent in Kakadu. Twenty-three family deaths were recorded by Children's Ground staff between January 2014 and March 2017 and had a direct impact on children's learning and wellbeing. These factors are presented in more detail in the community section 'Change and impact for Community'.

To show the impact of common individual and family circumstances on children's participation in learning, Figure 6 shows the pattern of attendance for four children with different lived experiences influencing participation in learning from 2014-2016. Individualised learning and wellbeing support saw an increase in participation over time for three children.



Figure 6: Common individual and family influences on child participation in early learning



Child A (2-4 years): Mobility. Family moved regularly, spending time living with family in KWA and living with family in another area.

Child B (2-4 years): Health, Grief and Loss. Experienced chronic health issues from birth and throughout his early years. Family also experienced regular family deaths.

Child C (3-5 years): Family Violence: This child witnessed violence in the family home.

Child D (2-4 years): No access to transport, lived in overcrowding, often seeing substance abuse and family and community conflict.

Despite the daily circumstances of ill-health, overcrowding, ongoing grief, loss and trauma, by 2016 Child B, C and D each achieved periods of between 8-11 consecutive weeks of 15 hours of early learning – which is consistent with the national target of Universal Access.²⁰ This impact is significant for children living in these circumstances who, before 2014 when Children's Ground started, had never engaged with early learning.

²⁰ Universal Access: Children participating in a high quality early childhood education program for 15 hours per week or 600 hours per year in the year before full-time school.

To understand the percentage of children who increased their consistency in engagement over time, data for children aged 2-5 years was analysed. Children younger than two years of age were encouraged to come with family at any time, however our policy was to encourage greater participation of children in more formal early learning from 3 years and over. Young children were supported within the context of their family with maternal and child health, development and wellbeing.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased regular engagement of children in learning

For children aged 2-5 years, there was an increase in participation over time with patterns of both high and low periods of engagement. When children attended early years learning in any week or period of weeks, they attended regularly. When they did not attend, they were often not present for a whole week or a number of weeks.

Analysis of the 'participating population' demonstrated that frequency of attendance increased from 2014-2016. In 2014, 29% of children were attending 1-2 days per week. By 2016, 21% were attending three or more times per week and a further 21% were attending 1-2 days per week.

Notwithstanding the stresses impacting attendance, the data shows that the percentage of children attending 3+ days per week (which exceeds the Universal Access target of 600 hours per year) increased from 2014 to 2016. Days of attendance for some children in smaller communities surrounding Jabiru (outstations) were limited by mobile learning only being available weekly, not daily, compared with children who were able to access learning at the intergenerational community centre daily.

Of the regularly participating population, the data showed that in 2016, on average, children attended 2.7 days per week for the weeks they engaged.

From zero to regular

The cohort of regular-attending children had never participated in formal early learning before engaging with Children's Ground. Their attendance increased from zero to regular attendance, while still living with a range of stresses.

The evaluation evidence shows that children and their families who had never participated in early learning, and who were living with significant stress and other barriers, built regular periods of engagement over time. Children who engaged with Children's Ground from their earliest years built significant periods of consistent attendance – some building to consecutive weeks of engagement equivalent to and beyond Universal Access of 15 hours per week.

Children's Ground found that attendance was enabled by the responsive and supportive environments provided across the integrated service platform.



Children's progress in their early childhood learning and development

When asked 'What do you think has been the most important/biggest change since Children's Ground started three years ago?', 13 of 22 family members referred to children attending school (Children's Ground). Families made the following comments about their children's engagement and learning:

"Is gamak [good], the kids learn both ways Bininj and Balanda. That's how Children's Ground is."

"Lots of changes. Now the kids attend school [Children's Ground] not like before. Children's Ground gave them confidence...in every way."

"Bininj kids used to be shy now they are confident to mix with other kids. Children's Ground gave them that confidence. It is a good balance between Bininj and Balanda ways here."

"They are growing culturally. Culturally and educationally... didn't know English and ABCs...they are going well!"

Bininj families, 2017

The children attending Children's Ground early years learning had not previously engaged in formal learning environments. There were significant changes and progress in development for regularly attending children over the three years of operations.

Early Childhood Educators recorded children's learning and development, and families (using a five point scale of: A lot better; Better; No change; Worse; and A lot worse) were asked to reflect on their children's learning after three years with Children's Ground. Both educators and families reported on children's English/Western learning (English language, literacy and numeracy, digital and creative skills) and First Cultural learning (land/country, kinship and other cultural knowledge systems and practices).



Findings for Progress Indicator: Children are progressing in their early childhood learning and development (First Cultural and English/Western learning)

Families

When asked to compare their children's learning to before Children's Ground:

- 19 of 22 people reported children speaking their first language was 'better' or 'a lot better'.
- All (21) reported children speaking English was 'better' or 'a lot better'.
- 15 of 19 reported children's First Cultural learning was 'better' or 'a lot better'.
- 20 of 21 reported children's English/Western learning was 'better' or 'a lot better'.

Early Childhood Educators

For the 'regular attending' cohort of children aged 2-5 years, records showed that over 50% of children were at or above age appropriate development across nearly all learning domains (social, emotional, language, cultural knowledge), except for the English/Western learning domain. Forty-four per cent were meeting English numeracy and literacy development milestones (not adjusted for second language acquisition).

For the children not at age appropriate development, the majority were considered on track and progressing well in their development. However, there were some children not at age appropriate levels and having persistent difficulty with social (6%), emotional (13%), Western knowledge (13%) and language (6%) development.

Early Childhood Educators assessed that 87% of the 'regular attending' children had progressed in their Western knowledge:

- 94% had progressed in English acquisition.
- 100% had progressed in first language and cultural knowledge and language acquisition.
- 100% progressed in their physical development.
- 87% progressed in their emotional development.
- 94% progressed in social development.

One Children's Ground educator reflected

"I look at the four to five age group, who have engaged with Children's Ground pretty regularly for about three years, and I would say they are above developmental levels. While every child's different, C1 [age four] shows interest in learning English, like reading and writing English, speaks Kunwinjku fluently...We're still very verbal...but he's demonstrating the skills of pre-reading. So, by the time he gets to JAS, I believe that he will be able to move up reading levels much quicker."

Children's Ground Balanda Early Childhood Educator, 2017

In the independent evaluation survey (n=10) administered by MCRI, 90% of local service providers reported that Children's Ground had an impact on early childhood learning: 50% reported a significant impact and 40% reported a slight impact.

The Jabiru Area School noted that overall when children transitioned into the local primary school, they entered with a school readiness that exceeded similar children who had not attended Children's Ground.

"They came so learning ready; how to sit in a classroom with a group of kids, getting up on stage, doing things at assembly, getting a merit award. All the usual indicators of how you know that kids have learnt what the game of school is, they came with all that. We had kids that were less school ready who hadn't been part of Children's Ground in the classes they're in, and they've been here [JAS] for three years."

Jabiru Area School, 2017

Children know their history and feel confident in their culture

KEY FINDINGS

- **100% of children engaged with first language and cultural learning at Children's Ground**
- **86% of families reported children doing better speaking their first language**
- **79% of families reported children doing better with Bininj learning**

The majority of Australian children enter schools and services that are delivered in their first language and that reflect their cultural values. This is not the case for many First Nations children who experience cultural dissonance daily. As a result, they experience poorer educational and life outcomes than non-Aboriginal children.

"Many children struggle at school when they are forced to learn in languages that are not their mother tongue. School systems that do not use learners' own languages or respect their cultures make it extremely difficult for children to stay in school and learn. For individuals, communities and even whole ethnic minority groups, this contributes to perpetuating cycles of marginalization and discrimination"²¹.

International and Australian evidence indicates that strength and maintenance of first culture and language enhances wellbeing, promotes resilience and strong sense of self identity and has measurable impact on wellbeing and preventing trauma; Language, academic, social and cultural outcomes all improve.^{22,23}

At Children's Ground, privileging first culture in learning means creating learning environments that place culture and language first, where Bininj people are making decisions about content and delivery.

"The only way a Bininj kid is going to learn is to make them a strong Bininj person"

Bininj family member, 2017



²¹ McDonald, R. 2011. First Nations languages and culture impacts on literacy and student achievement outcomes review of literature

²² United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation. 2012. Tinsiri Siribodhi Why Language Matters for the Millennium Development Goals

²³ Pinnock, H. and Vijayakumar, G. 2009. Language and Education, The Missing Link, How the language used in schools threatens the achievement of Education for All. Save the Children and the CfBT Education Trust.

Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

The following progress indicators were used to measure change and impact in relation to children's cultural learning and wellbeing:

- Increased access to and engagement of children in cultural activities, knowledge and skills development.
- Children are progressing in their first language and cultural learning.

Children's Ground's approach to children's cultural learning involves supporting increased access to cultural knowledge systems, practices, celebrations and wellbeing by integrating these across the CG Approach in the following ways:

- Bininj community governance.
- Connection to country: on country learning twice a week, family bush trips and camps.
- Bush foods: included within the nutrition program and as part of on country learning.
- Ceremonies: active support for sorry business, funerals and ceremonial business.
- Story, paint, dance and song: knowledge transfer and wellbeing promotion.
- Regular Bininj Kunborrk (traditional dance).
- Bush Medicine: teaching children about bush medicines and their promotion and use.

These practices were embedded in all Children's Ground service platform areas: learning, health, employment, community development and creative arts and culture.

Twice-weekly Learning on Country sessions were led by Bininj staff. They decided the location and focus for Learning on Country, and based on this, who in the community should lead the learning.

Balanda educators understood that they could be involved in, but not lead, cultural learning. This was found to be an important learning experience for Balanda staff - they reported understanding more about children's culture, language and how Bininj people teach children.

"Bininj teachers are teaching Balanda teachers. It matters how long the Balanda teachers are there. Bininj are doing well teaching Balanda about Bininj culture, language, learning and kids."

Bininj staff member, 2017

It was found that privileging Bininj culture in child learning and development was a key driver for family engagement and subsequently, child engagement in learning. Further analysis of this finding is presented in the family outcome section.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased access to and engagement of children in cultural activities, knowledge and skills development

All (100%) children aged 0-11 years who engaged in formal and extended hours learning:

- Were engaged in cultural learning and knowledge development in formal and informal learning environments and on country learning twice a week throughout the year.
- Learned in their first language.
- Learned alongside their family and from their family and important cultural leaders.

Data related to children and families participating in cultural practices and events has relevance across multiple outcome areas. From 2014 to 2016 all (100%) children participated in cultural learning alongside their family, from cultural educators and senior cultural teachers.

In evaluation interviews, families consistently referred to Children's Ground 'doing it Bininj way' and 'Balanda walking with Bininj' - with repeated reference to cultural practices, children learning in their first language, on country and learning traditional ways from their cultural elders and family.

"They [children] loved it when they walked with elders. They tell them about land and culture and old time stories. Now they do it lots."

"We learn more stuff now - about our culture. Song, dance, knowledge. How to respect each other and elders. We now teaching the kids about family, and land and stories..."

Bininj families, 2017

The intergenerational learning that occurred and the importance of this for children was evidenced by Bininj people. Families referred to the importance of children learning from senior cultural people, the importance of children being surrounded by their family and how young people and some adults have learned more about their culture.

"Being with family is the way Bininj people learn - from their family."

"Children's Ground gave [cultural] teachers the space to do what they naturally did in community and helped it be respected."

"Because they are staying in culture, we show them our culture, they follow our way. Culture keeps you out of trouble. Stay out of trouble. Show wurdurd [children] ceremony, sorry business. Teach kids hunting."

Dad and grandfather used to go hunting...use spear...it was hard. They taught me how to hunt and paint. Children's Ground lets us keep teaching our kids like my grandfather did...my dad is important teacher for Bininj. Children's Ground helped that...helped him be the teacher (summary of story from family member).

Bininj families, 2017

Findings for Progress Indicator: Children are progressing in their first language and cultural learning

As reported in the previous section:

- 86% of families (n=22) reported children were doing better or a lot better speaking their first language.
- 79% (n=19) reported children were doing better or a lot better in Bininj learning.
- Children's Ground educators reported that 87% of children were progressing in their cultural learning, either at or above age-appropriate learning (assessed with families).

From the independent evaluation survey, 90% of local service providers (n=10) reported that Children's Ground had an impact on the cultural wellbeing of children: 60% reported a significant impact and 30% reported a slight impact.

Families reported:

"Language was declining - English first. Children's Ground helped Elders very keen for them [children] to learn Kunwinjku. All the family appreciated it for when they talk to them."

"Helped my children speak and understand Kunwinjku...[Child Y, age 5] understands Kunwinjku and [Child X, age 9] speaks both because of Children's Ground."

"These old people share this history, and we will share our history to the next generation and who they really are."

Bininj families, 2017

One local service provider commented:

"I think it empowered Bininj to speak their own language and to be employed to teach their kids in language."

Local service, 2017

Bininj employment meant that children were being taught by their family and important cultural teachers and leaders. Children's Ground was unable to measure the extent to which cultural learning occurred for children at home and in their communities outside of Children's Ground operations. It was observed by Balanda staff and informally reported by families across the three years that there was an increase in children engaging in cultural learning with their families at home.



Children are healthy and happy

KEY FINDINGS

- **100% of children in formal learning engaged in health promotion including nutrition, ear and dental health, skin health, physical and emotional wellbeing**
- **373 child primary health assessments undertaken – with supported follow-up for health concerns provided on 220 occasions**
- **100% of families interviewed reported their children’s health as better since Children’s Ground started and 86% reported their children’s happiness as ‘a lot better’**

Australia has a world class health system. Despite this, First Nations people consistently have the poorest health outcomes and a burden of disease irreconcilable with the standards of health and wellbeing experienced by most Australians.²⁴

The National Framework for Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families (2016) notes that “the child and family health service system does not currently meet the needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families”²⁵.

Children’s Ground’s Family Health and Wellbeing Framework is a health promotion approach that recognises that, at any time, every First Nations family is likely to have a family member or multiple family members suffering from ill-health and trauma.



Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

In relation to children being healthy and happy, change has been measured using the following headline progress indicators:

- Increased access to health promotion, support and core health and wellbeing services.
- Increased engagement in nutrition and health promotion.
- Increased access to maternal and early childhood health promotion and support.

Childhood health and wellbeing was driven through four main strategies: nutrition; health promotion; targeted child and maternal health; family health; and social and emotional wellbeing - all integrated into learning, as well as support for children and families outside the learning sessions.



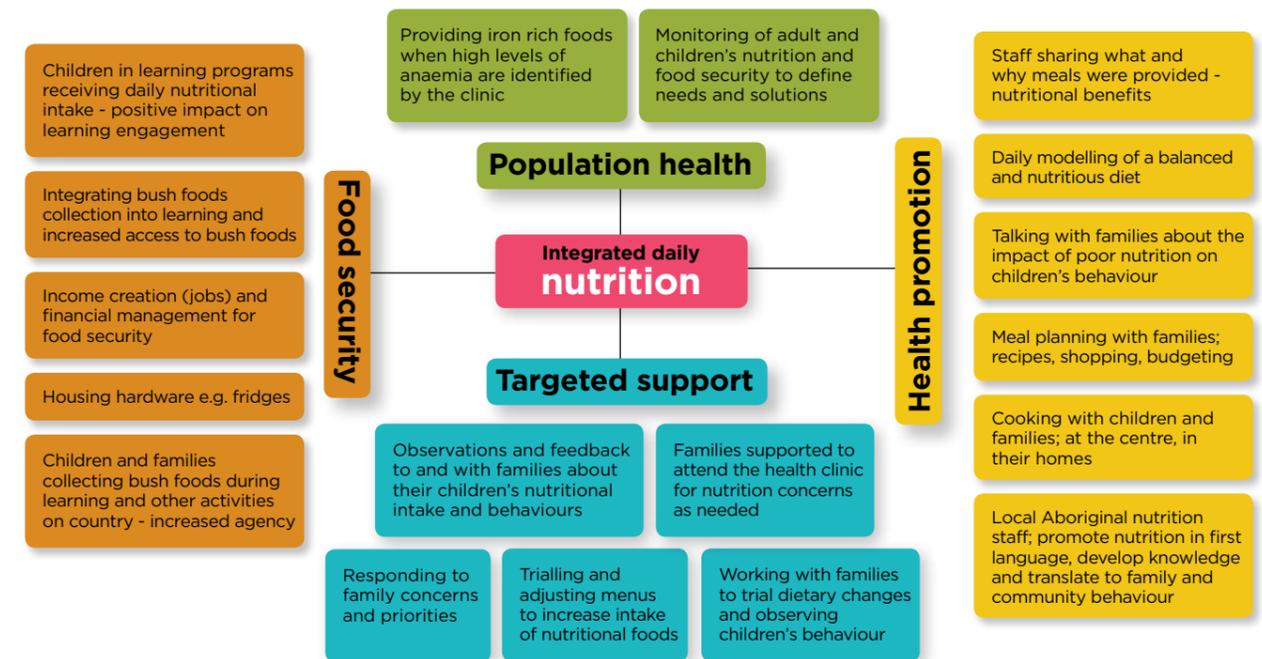
²⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework. 2017. Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council, AHMAC, Canberra.
²⁵ Department of Health, 2016. National Framework for the Health Services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families, Australian Government, Canberra.

Nutrition

The nutrition program provided a daily focus on health. It included a balanced diet across breakfast, morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea for every child attending early years and primary learning. This began from the start of operations in 2013 and was delivered every day until closure in 2017.

The strategy of a daily nutrition program became a foundation for health promotion, population health responses, targeted/individualised support and food security – as depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Daily nutrition program as a foundation for all health promotion and support



Note: Not all activities occurred with every family. Families identified what they wanted and needed. This diagram represents the breadth of support provided as requested by families.

The nutrition program supported changes within some home environments through in home support and through work engagement. One parent, also a nutrition worker with Children’s Ground, reflected on how her daughter’s participation in early years encouraged new foods at home:

“I wanted to be in the kitchen....This is my first job and first experience for me... At home, she’ll ask me if I can make the same food that I make here. So I buy some of the stuff to take home that she likes from Children’s Ground so I can make it at home for her.”

Bininj parent, 2015

The nutrition programs worked with individuals, families and at a population level. In 2015, the Jabiru health clinic reported an increase in the number of children with anaemia. After liaising with the clinic, Children’s Ground’s nutrition team introduced a project to increase the nutritional intake of iron and reduce the prevalence of anaemia. This included providing fresh juices with no additives for all children and iron supplements for targeting children identified by the clinic. While changes in anaemia cannot necessarily be attributed to the work of Children’s Ground, data from the Jabiru health clinic showed that anaemia in children decreased from 15 children in 2015 to four children in 2016 following the iron intake intervention at Children’s Ground.



Child Health and wellbeing promotion

Core health promotion was integrated into early years and primary learning daily. In addition to the nutrition program, health activities included walking, bike riding and other exercise, as well as targeted health education sessions which covered topics such as skin, dental and ear health, safety and nutrition.

Table 3 shows the frequency of health promotion, early intervention and support for service access provided by the Public Health Practitioner and Social/Emotional Wellbeing Counsellor (this data excludes health promotion and support provided by other Children's Ground staff).

Table 3: Frequency of public health practitioner child health promotion and early intervention

Health Promotion and Early Intervention	2015	2016
School Physical Education Health	70	73
Child Targeted Health Sessions	37	52
Child Support to Attend Jabiru Clinic	118	102
Dental Referrals / Support	22	68
Child Primary Assessments	180	193

At times, health promotion topics were identified by Bininj families who then led sessions with children and families. For example, preventing rotting teeth through reduced intake (or consumption) of soft drink and giving up smoking.

These often stemmed from an adult in the community experiencing a health issue they wanted to prevent the children from experiencing. Health Promotion staff provided support for children and their families to engage with the local health clinic with the aim to intervene earlier on health related concerns.

In response to the level of complex trauma that children and families live with, a dedicated Social and Emotional Wellbeing Counsellor provided support to children. In 2015 and 2016, the counsellor engaged with 31 and 38 children aged 0-8 years respectively. Children were engaged as individuals and with their families.

The emotional wellbeing of children was supported through trauma informed practice, building emotional literacy and self-care from their earliest years. Mental health promotion occurred within and outside the learning sessions, often at the community centre, in their community or at home.

Age-appropriate, play-based sessions were delivered with children and supported children to express their feelings about stress, trauma and grief they experienced. They were encouraged to develop an understanding of what was happening in their environment and how to cope and manage the feelings associated with profound trauma that many experience. These sessions also modelled trauma informed practice for Early Childhood Educators and other health, wellbeing and community development staff and families.

Engagement in social/emotional wellbeing support is also presented in section 'Family Health and Wellbeing'.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased access to health promotion, support and core health and wellbeing services

Children's Ground increased access to health and wellbeing services and supports evidenced by the data in Table 3 above.

Family perceptions of access to health services and support is a key indicator of the extent to which children have access to and engage in such services and supports.

When asked about 'places you get help when you have worries about health for wurdurd and your family and how is it now compared to before Children's Ground started?':

- All (19) families reported 'better' (12) or 'a lot better' (7) in relation to places to get help when they have worries about children's health.
- All (20) families reported 'better' (4) or 'a lot better' (16) in relation to places to get help when they have worries about children's behaviour or sadness.

The Family Health and Wellbeing team undertook health 'check-ins' every day with children in the learning sessions. This was followed up with targeted primary health assessments when concerns were identified by the family, educators, the child or the Health team. This enabled targeted responses to hearing, skin and other health issues - support was provided by the Health team or they supported families to attend the local health clinic. Dental, immunisation, child health checks and hearing assessments were also facilitated by the Family Health and Wellbeing team.

Deliberate regularity of health check-ins and health promotion sessions in the learning programs built agency for children and their families to engage in and manage their health. With sores and boils identified as a key health concern, the learning and health teams developed age-appropriate play-based activities, called 'going to the clinic'. Dressing up to play doctors, children were taught how to identify and clean any sores they had. Age-related conversations were held about what happens to their bodies and health when sores are left untreated, including the potential impact on their kidneys later in life. Groups of children demonstrated an understanding of and agency over their own health.

A Children's Ground Early Childhood Educator shared the following examples of children supporting each other's health:

M noticed her sister K had a boil and she said to her aunty "Mummy, K got boiler she needs to go to clinic".

A noticed B (who experienced recurrent ear infections) had pus in his ear so he grabbed a tissue to wipe it carefully, before telling B's family that he had to go to the clinic because he had a sore ear.

"The fundamentals of Children's Ground sit firmly within global strategies to address accepted social determinants of health... Beyond their overarching systemic interventions, Children's Ground... promotes reflection by services to improve their own mode and standards of delivery."

Dr. Paul Rivalland, GP, Jabiru Clinic, 2016

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased engagement in nutrition and health promotion

Daily health checks-in integrated into learning sessions meant that all participating children engaged with health promotion - which means a critical mass of children aged 0-5 years engaged in nutrition, physical activity, social emotional wellbeing and most importantly learning about and increasing agency over their own health.

While health concerns remain prevalent for many children:

- 13 of 24 families reported children eating more and eating healthy food and drink.
- All (24) families felt their children's health is 'better' (14) or 'a lot better' (10) since Children's Ground started.
- 18 of 21 families felt their children's happiness was 'a lot better' since Children's Ground started, and three families felt there had been no change.

"They are healthy now that Children's Ground is running. They look so healthy today. They get good food everyday not like before. All junk or sometimes starving... Families and kids getting stronger and happier and more learning."

Bininj family member, 2017

From the independent evaluation survey (n=10):

- 90% of local service providers reported that Children's Ground had an impact on children's social/emotional wellbeing: 50% reported a significant impact and 40% reported a slight impact.
- 70% of local service providers reported that Children's Ground had an impact on child health and wellbeing: 40% reported a significant impact and 30% reported a slight impact.

Maternal and Child health

Children's Ground records indicate that between 2014 and 2016, eight Bininj babies were born into families who were part of the service population. Children's Ground offered support to each family. Throughout pregnancy, the families of four of these babies were rarely or not at all engaged with Children's Ground, and families of the other four babies were actively engaged with Children's Ground.

With the actively engaged families, maternal and child health promotion occurred at the intergenerational community centre, at home and in their community. Support included:

- Maternal health, nutrition and wellbeing during and after pregnancy.
- Health promotion, such as conversations about the impact of maternal health and environments on unborn and newborn babies, including smoking, drinking and exposure to violence.
- Social/emotional wellbeing, particularly for women experiencing ongoing trauma, violence and substance abuse. This occurred throughout pregnancy and after babies were born.
- Following up after health clinic appointments and supporting clinic visits, if requested, during pregnancy and after birth.
- Connecting mothers, children and families with relevant Children's Ground services/support and staff (nutrition, health, learning) and external services as requested.

- Providing a hamper for families when the baby is born packed with nappies, clothes and other practical supplies.
- Observing physical health of mother and baby once born, and engaging mother, family and extended family in regular conversations about health and wellbeing.

Table 4 shows the number and percentage of children engaged with Children's Ground in their earliest years, across a range of learning and wellbeing support.

Table 4: Number and percentage of children aged 0-3 years engaged with Children's Ground

	2014	2015	2016
0-1 year	75% (12 of 16)	90% (9 of 10)	100% (7 of 7)
2-3 years	83% (19 of 23)	74% (17 of 23)	82% (14 of 17)

For pregnant mothers and families with newborn children not actively engaged with Children's Ground, staff checked in and offered support both formally and informally as part of general community engagement. Support was also offered to their immediate and extended family members.

Children's Ground Family Health and Wellbeing staff reported that a family's engagement and relationship with Children's Ground before their baby was born was an enabler for maternal, child and family support during pregnancy and after the baby was born.

Children's Ground accessed and reviewed data from the Jabiru health clinic to understand whether or not any population level change had occurred across key health indicators. The small numbers meant that significant change was difficult to determine, however, some change was evident during the period of Children's Ground operations.

Before Children's Ground, the Jabiru health clinic data indicated no significant concerns relating to maternal and child health for Bininj people in the region - all women who gave birth received ante-natal care, and the majority (83%) of recorded births resulted in babies with 'normal' birth weight. There was no significant change in this data during the time Children's Ground was operating.

While the rates of immunisation were already high in Kakadu prior to Children's Ground's presence, an increase of 13 children from 45 (80%) in 2013 to 58 (85%) in 2015 occurred at the same time as Children's Ground operations focused on supporting engagement in immunisations with the health clinic.



Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased access to maternal and early childhood health promotion and support

While most pregnant mothers and their babies did engage with Children's Ground in various ways, maternal health promotion and support during pregnancy was not implemented as extensively as intended.

Children's Ground maintained contact with and provided maternal and child health support for the majority of children who were born during the period.

Of the eight babies born from 2014-16:

- Seven engaged with some part of the CG Approach in their first year of life.
- Six remained engaged with Children's Ground from 12 months of age until Children's Ground closure.

As indicated in Table 4, Children's Ground engaged with between 74-100% of children aged 0-3 years from 2014-2016. This included maternal, child health and child development.

From the independent evaluation survey (n=10), 70% of local service providers reported that Children's Ground had an impact on maternal and child wellbeing; 40% reported a significant impact and 30% reported a slight impact.



At the request of the community, Children's Ground implemented prevention and early intervention approaches with small groups of sexually active teenage young women (referred to as Yawkyawk by Bininj people). Community leaders in KWA identified the need to start engaging with young women at risk in relation to sexual health, unplanned pregnancy and substance misuse.

In 2015, the 'Yawkyawk Program' was delivered by three local Bininj women and the Children's Ground therapeutic counsellor and is an example of a Bininj designed and led preventative approach for the next generation of mothers. Weekly sessions created a therapeutic environment where young people shared their experiences while developing strategies to reduce risk. Support focused on sexual health, safe behaviours, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and maternal health.



Summary of changes for children

Children's Ground has evidenced change in child learning and wellbeing in the region. A new cohort of children aged 0-5 years, which had not previously accessed early years learning, became active learners. Children's Ground engaged with a critical mass of children aged 0-11 years across the region in early childhood, primary aged schooling and extended hours learning/activities. Children's Ground created an environment where children were able to enjoy learning and extra-curricular activities both after school and throughout holidays, as well as dedicated health and wellbeing promotion.

A cohort of primary aged children who were previously disengaged or poorly engaged in school became regular participants in learning through Children's Ground. Families and teachers both reported improved outcomes in English numeracy and literacy and cultural knowledge for children regularly engaged in formal learning. A clear finding from the evaluation (from families, staff and services) was that children growing up and learning, surrounded by their family and culture, gave them confidence and emotional security. This cultural safety and security proved to be a necessary precursor to successful outcomes in learning and wellbeing and was enabled by Bininj employment and community governance.

A targeted focus on maternal health care and prevention was not achieved as intended. However, a strong focus on engagement of young children and connecting with pregnant mothers did result in a critical mass of children aged 0-3 years in the region engaging with Children's Ground.

One of the key health outcomes was a focus on daily nutrition, which impacted child health and wellbeing and created daily opportunities for health promotion conversations improving family food knowledge and behaviour. Access to child health promotion resulted in regular engagement in healthy routines and activities for children and supported children and their families to access clinics to manage health related issues. There were observed improvements in health, health behaviours and agency over their own health and wellbeing; families also reported increased access to services and supports they needed for their children's health and wellbeing.

Change and impact for families

The most significant influence on a child is their family. Children aged 0-8 years of age form their sense of identity, place and belonging in the context of their family.

The evaluation framework identified two key outcome areas for children's families.

- **Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development**
- **Families are socially and economically strong**

Short-term impact for families was expected over the first years of implementation, however, significant change and impact for these long-term family outcomes cannot be expected or evidenced within the first 10-15 years. Change is expected in family outcomes when the generation of children born during Children's Ground grow up and start raising their own families.



Families are involved in their child's learning, wellbeing and development

KEY FINDINGS

- **100% of children had family engaged directly in their learning and wellbeing**
- **261 family members (18+ years) actively engaged with their children's learning and wellbeing**
- **91% of community members interviewed reported increased family engagement with their children**

Many First Nations people have been systematically excluded from walking alongside and supporting their children in learning, health and social and emotional wellbeing due to a range of complex reasons.

Bininj families emphasised the importance of family involvement in their children's lives to support their early development and lifelong learning. This priority is consistent with Western evidence.

Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

The key headline outcome identified by the KWA community was 'Families walking alongside their children.' Their goal was to have family members engaged in their children's learning and wellbeing. This was a priority from the beginning and was driven by local Bininj governance of Children's Ground. Change was measured using the following progress indicator:

- Increased family engagement with children – families walking alongside their children.

All children in formal learning at Children's Ground had family engaged daily in their learning and wellbeing. This was reported to have a positive influence on children's learning and wellbeing. Children's Ground found that by providing supported and culturally safe opportunities for families to engage in programs and activities alongside their children, that young people and adults in families engaged with children in ways they had reportedly not previously engaged. This engagement was enabled by Bininj governance, employment and Children's Ground privileging Bininj culture.

From 2014-16, a total of 261 family members (18+ years) actively engaged with their children's learning and wellbeing.

Table 5 shows the number of young people and adults who engaged with Children's Ground as siblings, parents, grandparents and other extended family by year of operation.

Table 5: Number of young people and adults (families) engaged across the CG Approach

	2014	2015	2016
12-17 years	34	40	36
18-24 years	44	38	44
25+ years	97	98	100
TOTAL	175	176	180

**Note that engagement of young people and adults was not thoroughly or consistently collected for all programs and events. These numbers should be considered as conservative.*

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased family engagement with children – families walking alongside their children

100% of children in formal learning at Children's Ground had family actively engaged in their learning and wellbeing. Table 5 shows that there was not a significant increase in the number of families engaged over the three years, yet initial engagement from 2014 was sustained and has been reported as a new reality for children and families.

21 of 23 community members felt families were walking alongside their children more (5) or a lot more (16).

Families reported:

"More parents caring for their children and spending time together... they [Children's Ground] helping all families and teaching them to be strong."

"Lots of changes. Before there was nothing for them. Children's Ground make a lot of changes. Children's Ground go to the families...got them out of the woodworks."

Bininj families, 2017

From the independent evaluation survey (n=10), 90% of local service providers reported that Children's Ground had an impact on family engagement and involvement in their children's learning and wellbeing: 50% reported a significant impact and 40% reported a slight impact. One local service reported:

"While CG focused on kids they were able to engage young people in employment and learning alongside the kids and families - without this they would have missed another whole generation of parents...I think it's the power of families being actively involved in their [children's] learning and development. Everyone's job had a role in the teaching and learning of the kids at Children's Ground...When young people see [Bininj] staff working with their young siblings and family it reinforces it [employment] can be for them too."

Local service, 2017

Families walked alongside their children in early and primary learning by setting goals for their children's learning and development and by participating in learning sessions voluntarily and as teachers both on country and at the centre.

As already described, young people and adults also walked alongside young children in cultural practices and celebrations such as Bininj Kunborrk (traditional dance), arts, storytelling, bush trips/camps and in family nights and community events – within and outside Children's Ground operations. Families spoke of the importance of Children's Ground supporting young people at risk as part of broader family engagement and wellbeing:

"They are good for Yawkyawk and Yawurrinj [young men]. It's good for them to get them out and doing stuff. Getting ready for the workplace. Teaching them different skills. The elders and Yawkyawk and Yawurrinj taking the wurdurd on learning on country... Now Children's Ground offering the programs, it wasn't here for them when they were younger. They didn't have support. No programs, that meant anything to anyone."

Bininj family member, 2017

Families also took on teaching and leadership roles within Children's Ground, their families and the community. This enabled many to engage actively in their children's learning and to start walking alongside their children in the way they wanted – findings in relation to this are presented in other sections of this report. When asked how it felt to be involved in making decisions about their children, prevalent responses included; "Gamak [good], Happy, Feels good, Proud".

These quotes from families represent common responses:

"I'm so proud he's going to school every day. They [Children's Ground] heard what I was saying about what I wanted for my children. They believed in me."

"I love to be involved to support these little ones."

"Children's Ground helped, especially with learning on country learning. Family don't spend much time with kids before and now they are with them on country and it's so good."

Bininj families, 2017

Through the independent evaluation survey, Children's Ground Bininj and Balanda staff were asked about how Children's Ground worked with families. 92% (12 of 13) of Children's Ground staff agreed or strongly agreed that families (parents/grandparents/carers) had opportunities to set goals for their children's learning (Bininj and Western), health and wellbeing.

By listening to and supporting Bininj cultural ways, by demonstrating respect for their knowledge and role as their children's first and most important teachers, and through Bininj employment and community governance, Children's Ground achieved extensive and active family engagement in children's learning, health and wellbeing.

Families are socially and economically strong

KEY FINDINGS

- **87 local Bininj people employed with 94% Bininj staff retention rate - 81% weren't working when they began employment with Children's Ground**
- **81 Bininj employees actively managed their income through Children's Ground's financial literacy and money management program**

Research illustrates the foundations for children's learning and wellbeing are in the home and that trauma, stress, social and economic disadvantage are key risks for poor educational and life outcomes.^{26,27} The rates of family violence and risk to children in First Nations communities occur at alarming levels and have a causal relationship with social, cultural and economic disadvantage.²⁸

One key determinant in family wellbeing is employment. Employment impacts mental health, economic health, social health and physical health (food security) within families.²⁹

How Children's Ground sought to support families' cultural wellbeing is presented in other sections throughout this report. The two key areas of Children's Ground support presented in this section are Family Economic Wellbeing and Family Health and Wellbeing.

Short-term change sought within this outcome area related to family environments for the current generation of children. However, the long-term progress measures related to the current generation of children entering adulthood socially and economically strong.

Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

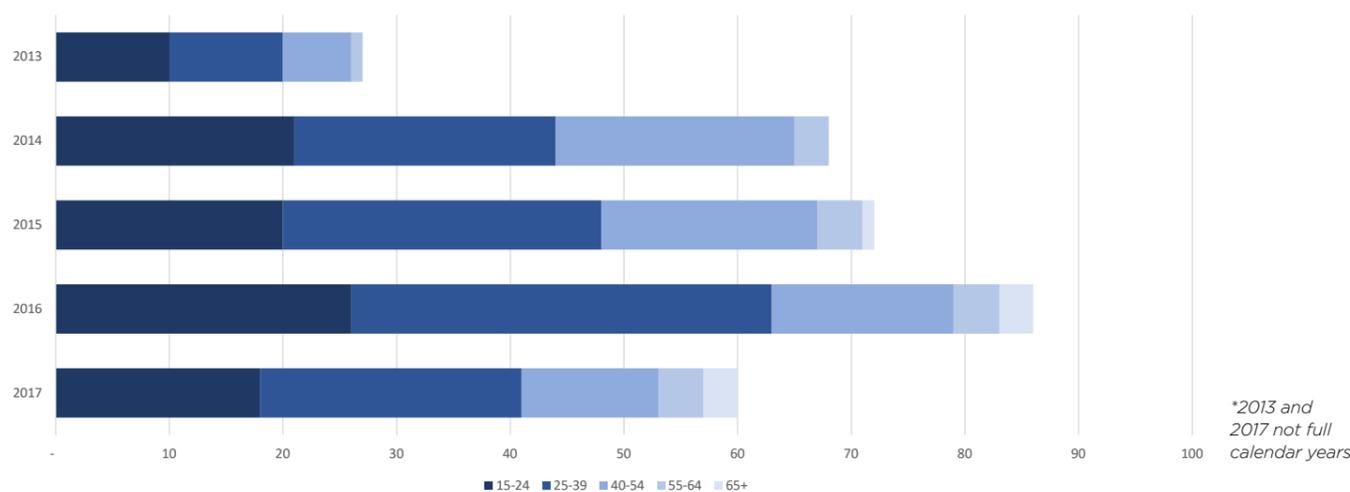
Change in relation to the economic and social strength of families has been measured by engagement using the following progress indicators:

- Increased access to and engagement in employment for local Bininj families and community.
- Increased stability in Bininj engagement in employment at Children's Ground.
- Increased access to supported financial literacy and management support.
- Increased health literacy and access to clinical health support.
- Increased access to and engagement in social/emotional wellbeing promotion and support.

Family employment

Children's Ground works with communities in which the majority of First Nations people are living below the poverty line and generational unemployment is common. Children's Ground's flexible employment model changed the system in terms of the way First Nations people, particularly those who were long-term unemployed, could engage in employment. This resulted in extensive Bininj employment.

Graph 6: Unique number of Bininj people employed at Children's Ground, by age group and year



Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased access to and engagement in employment for local Bininj families and community

Children's Ground's flexible, 'no barriers' approach to employment model led to:

87 local Bininj people engaging in employment with Children's Ground - most of whom were previously long-term unemployed.

In 2016, a survey of 44 (of 83) Children's Ground Bininj staff found that only one person had previously engaged with contracted employment before Children's Ground. Sixteen per cent (7 people) had previously engaged in casual work and 81% (36) were not working at the time they commenced with Children's Ground.

In addition to engaging 87 local Bininj people in employment (as seen in Graph 6) from 2013 to 2017, Children's Ground achieved a 94% retention rate. The flexible employment model meant employees may not have worked consistently every week or month – so this included employees that worked at Children's Ground at some point in each calendar year.

The increase in Bininj employment across the KWA region is supported by ABS Census data, presented in Table 6. It shows that between 2011 and 2016, the Aboriginal employment rate in Kakadu West Arnhem rose by almost five percentage points. This rise was not part of a wider trend in the Northern Territory where the Aboriginal employment rate showed little change from 2011 to 2016.

From the early days of implementation, the positive influence of extensive Bininj employment became clear. With multiple people employed within households and family groups, economic pressures on only a few employed individuals were eased, humbug was reduced, and financial resources were shared.

Benefits of employment was a recurring theme in all interviews with Bininj families.

- 18 of 25 reported that family employment enabled people to be role models for children. They referred to children being proud to see their family work and that it was important for families to set a good example for children by working – especially those who had never worked before. This was also reported by six of 10 Children's Ground staff and three of six local services.
- 19 of 25 reported that employment gave young people and adults a purpose as opposed to people previously spending time at home bored, drinking, etc.
- 14 of 25 people reported employment led to changes in social circumstances for families, including decreased alcohol and other substance use, reduced arguments in families and community, and people becoming more involved and active with children and the community. This was also reported by six of 10 Children's Ground staff.

The Closing the Gap target to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians is measured using data on the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of workforce age (15-64 years) who are employed (the employment-to-population ratio, or employment rate).

As a point-in-time estimate, the Census does not capture the total number of Aboriginal people employed across the whole of 2016.³⁰ However, the data shows a rise in the Aboriginal employment rate between 2011 and 2016 for Kakadu West Arnhem (KWA) during the period of Children's Ground operations. It shows a rise in employment when including and excluding Jabiru. This indicates that Children's Ground's approach to employment has contributed to increased Bininj employment and the Closing the Gap target.

Table 6: ABS Census employment rate 2011 and 2016 Aboriginal People age 15-64 years

	KWA (excl. Jabiru)	KWA (incl. Jabiru)	Remote NT	Very Remote NT	NT
2011 (incl CDEP) ³¹	51.4%	58.1%	36.3%	32.7%	36.4%
2011	36.7%	47.4%	32.7%	22.3%	29.3%
2016	40.3%	52.1%	33.2%	23.0%	30.1%

Bininj staff reported:

"Makes the kids feel proud and makes them also want to get up and work."

"It's important for Bininj to work. It gives them something to look forward to. You feel good about yourself and more confident. Some people see you as a role model. It's important for Bininj to work. And they have been put down for many years. They feel strong and proud now."

"Confidence. Able to talk to a group of people. Become a leader."

"It encourages them [Bininj families]. Makes them be role models. Set a good example."

"Shows kids growing up...he sees father and grandfather... He sees his family working."

"They gave us jobs for me gave me something to do. I'm isolated living out in the bush. Children's Ground is important because we're isolated. For him/her son/daughter to come in everything is really important to know is family. No licence, no car, no job, now I have independence."

"Because I seen a lot of Bininj people working and made me feel comfortable and I just felt like I fitted in."

Bininj employees and families, 2017

³⁰ The Census provides a 'point in time' estimate of employment. This is important, as a significant number of the employees of Children's Ground did not work every week or month. Many employees would not have been employed at Children's Ground in the week prior to Census night and as a result, many of them would not have been classified by the ABS as being employed. Some employees may have considered themselves to be temporarily absent from work.

³¹ For the 2011 Census the ABS treated CDEP recipients as being employed but for the 2016 Census the ABS did not treat participants in the Community Development Programme (CDP) as being employed.

Local services reported that:

“Some of the [Children’s Ground] employees...actually improved their health which I think was directly related by Children’s Ground. Some of the diabetics had improved blood sugar control, purely from the fact that the nutrition program that was happening down there [at Children’s Ground] and also getting out and exercising, moving around. You actually saw it, it’s not just anecdotal, you’ve got evidence through their results that that happened. And that comes from having employment with the service and being supported with nutrition, being supported with exercise which is so vital.”

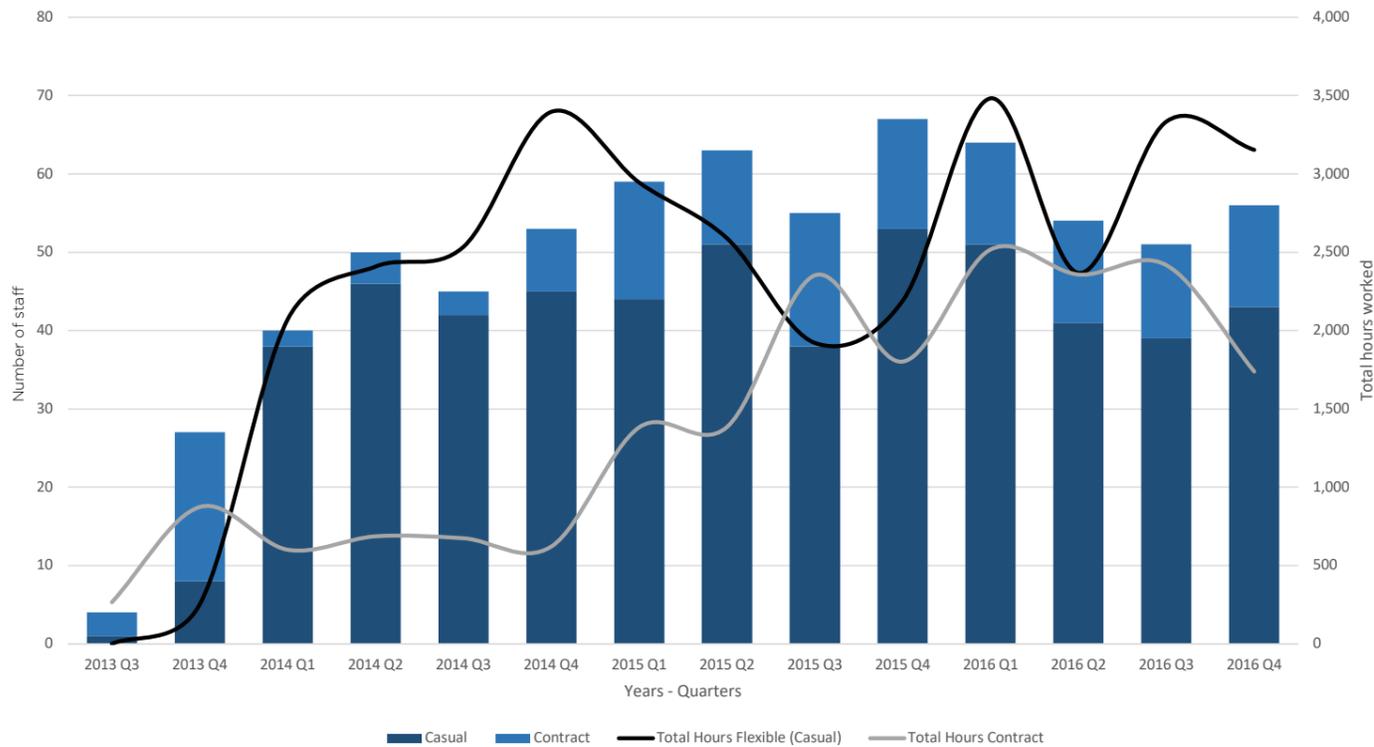
“They had huge employment down there [at Children’s Ground], and I think that’s probably the biggest concern about Children’s Ground leaving this area. What happens to all these people who were employed, because that has a huge knock on effect for health and wellbeing, people being employed is just vital.”

Local services, 2017



There is no ‘quick-fix’ for people who have been long-term unemployed. The CG Approach supported people to engage and then to build consistency in their employment. Soft entry points and variable hours contracts were important systemic enablers from which people could build consistency and engagement over time and at their own pace. Graph 7 shows the average number of hours worked each term by people in casual and contracted employment.

Graph 7: Total hours worked at Children’s Ground, by contract type, quarter and year



Findings for Progress Indicator: Increase stability in Bininj engagement in employment at Children’s Ground

Graph 7 shows that flexible (casual) employment increased quickly from the first full year of Children’s Ground operations in both number of staff and hours worked. This remained relatively stable from 2015 onwards. There was a strong appetite for work by adults, many of whom were previously long term unemployed and living with multiple barriers to employment.

Individual and community level stress impacted work hours. The dips in contract hours in quarter three 2015 correlated to an increase in contract staff for that period and community stress. The dip in casual staff in the second quarter of 2016 correlated with a significant community conflict that had an impact across the quarter. Dips in quarter four in contract hours coincided with royalty payments.

The rise in contract hours was reflective of staff entering the workforce and becoming regular and stable in their roles. As previously noted, many Bininj employees and families referred to employment at Children’s Ground. These quotes are indicative of the social benefits of employment for families.

“Help me change my habits.”

“Changed my life, feeling more confident, working with Balanda, not scared to work beside Balanda anymore.”

“...because I don’t want to stay home and drink and smoke. I want to work with the wurdurd.”

“Makes the kids feel proud and makes them also want to get up and work.”

“It is a good example. Before they never work in their life.”

“Shows kids growing up...he sees father and grandfather...He sees his family working.”

“It encourages them [Bininj families]. Makes them be role models. Set a good example.”

“Was just staying home, bored, nothing to do. I feel good my son is learning. I am learning. Opened my mind and make me feel I can do anything now.”

Bininj employees and families, 2017



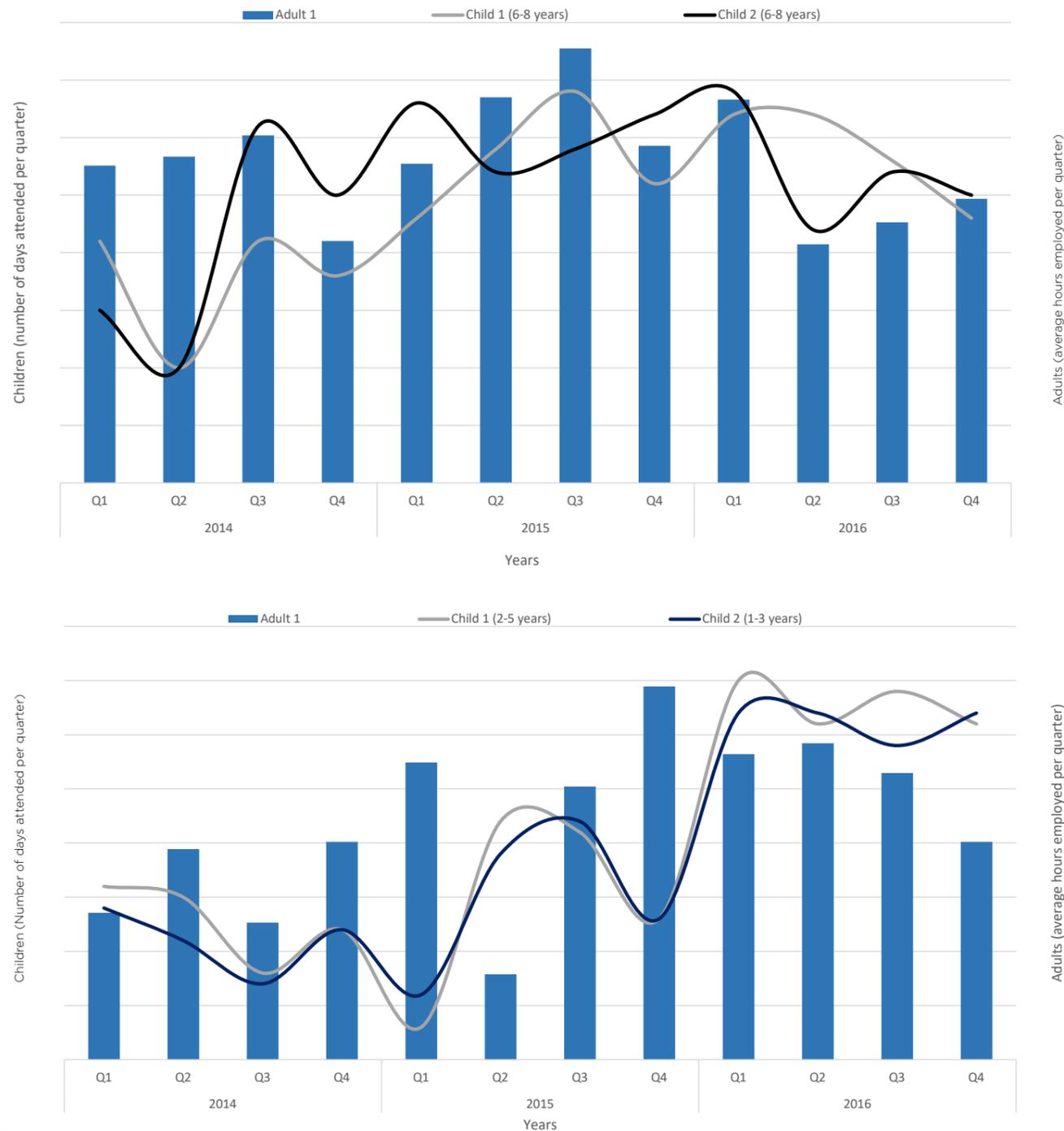
Relationship between family employment and child participation in learning

Family employment was found to be an enabler for families' engagement in their children's learning and wellbeing, as well as for child participation in learning. In evaluation interviews, community members regularly referred to families being employed at Children's Ground as important engagement with their children.

Analysis of employment and learning participation data for family groups/units demonstrated a link between children's

attendance in learning and their family's attendance in employment at Children's Ground. Figures 8 and 9 depict the employment participation by adults and learning participation for children within two family groups. These are representative experiences across families involved with Children's Ground. The first shows two periods of low child attendance and high employment attendance (2015 T1 and 2015 T4). During these periods, the children were in the care of another family member.

Figures 8 and 9: Link between child learning and adult employment engagement



The sample is too small to determine a statistically significant relationship. However, each graph shows a visible link between family days of employment and child attendance in the learning program. For these children, employment of their families was a driver/enabler for their engagement in learning. The adults in these family groupings were not all employed as educators in the learning program, but across Children's Ground service areas. All jobs/positions at Children's Ground interacted with the children and the learning program - so families were engaged in their children's learning and development irrespective of the role in which they were employed at Children's Ground.

Collectively, the family engagement and employment data suggest that child participation in early learning was positively influenced by family employment and engagement in Children's Ground. This demonstrates the importance of working with children's families and their community - the key people who surround children every day in their home and community environments. Families reported:

"Family worked because of kids. Instead of worrying about them at home they knew what was going on for their kids. Parents were learning too."

"They'll be happy. Parents working there. They see mum and dad working here...they love going to the school [Children's Ground]."

"Yes wurdurd get to follow parents to work and go school!"

Bininj families, 2017

When asked 'Why did you start working at Children's Ground?', many Bininj staff reported working for the children in their community, whether they were parents or not.

"For the kids, families, earn money."

"For the wurdurd, we wanted change to the community."

"For me it's been telling stories, going learning on country. More family, more places. Telling stories out in the bush... sometimes I don't feel like getting money, sometimes I just go because I love work."

Bininj staff members, 2017



Financial literacy and management

Economic wellbeing of families was also supported through financial management and literacy. Children's Ground employees were offered savings, wage portioning (having the option to receive a portion of their wage in food vouchers) and micro-financing. These options were available to the employees on a weekly basis as a budgeting mechanism. These choices were made by people to support their ability to buy food throughout the week and to purchase larger goods over a period of a few weeks or months. In Kakadu, where consumer options are limited, and people do not have access to credit cards and computers for on-line consumer options, this support was used by people to increase their financial and consumer choices.

The observed impact of people having the opportunity to make this choice was powerful.



Family health and Wellbeing

The burden of ill-health in families impacts children daily. Most children are living with a family member with chronic illness and social stress. As a place-based, intergenerational approach, Children's Ground worked with families to support their health and wellbeing. This was primarily achieved through access to health promotion, social and emotional wellbeing support, health literacy, support to access clinical health and cultural health and wellbeing practice.

All engaged families were involved in the daily nutrition program and health promotion activities alongside their children as they were integrated into the learning sessions. In addition to this, families were supported with family health planning and access to local clinical health services and care. Such support was also undertaken within a health promotion approach, with staff support focused on increasing health agency and advocacy, and particularly the logistics of implementing the recommended post-appointment care and medication plans/actions. Table 8 shows the frequency of health and wellbeing support provided by the Public Health Practitioner (this data excludes health support provided by other Children's Ground staff).

Table 8: Frequency of support for adults and young people by the Public Health Practitioner

	2015	2016
Support to attend Jabiru Clinic	280	165
Clinic care coordination consultations	34	54
Physio Referrals/Support	37	54
Specialist Tertiary Consultations	42	28
Dental Referrals/Support	21	50

Across 2015-16, the Public Health Practitioner also supported seven people and their families with pre-operative support, however, for confidentiality purposes these numbers are too small to publicly report by year.

Building health literacy included supporting people with pre, during and post clinical health appointments (at a family's request). Before each appointment the team would talk through what the appointment was for and helped to identify and target information people wanted and needed to share with the clinic staff. After the appointment, another conversation focused on what was discussed in the clinic appointment, interpreting illness and treatment information (when needed) and reiterating the treatment/response information heard at the clinic appointment. Adult health issues included skin, cardiac, eye, cancer and mental health and injury.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increase access to supported financial literacy and management support

From 2014 to 2016 a growing number of Bininj staff opted for financial management support, with varied amounts and times when they elected to do this.

Table 7: Number of Bininj staff who chose financial management and micro-financing

2014	2015	2016	All 2014-16
39	46	61	81

"It gave people a sense of what it means to have savings schemes that they can enfranchise themselves with...people's behaviour will shift and change depending on what's available...it's putting in place systems of savings that people have agency over and can make that is consistent and compatible with the varying demands in their lives. You'd have to speak to people about the impact on them, but what we saw was people regularly exercising their opportunity to manage their finances in a different way."

Balanda staff member, 2017

Such employee options are either not available or are limited in many organisations, particularly the choice to change these circumstances on a weekly basis. However, choice, flexibility and financial literacy were found to be critical in supporting people to achieve personal agency and economic strength.

Progress Indicator: Increased health literacy and access to clinical health support

Jabiru health clinic data demonstrates there was a substantial increase in people participating in adult health checks from 2012 to 2016. Table 9 shows that the largest increase was for people aged 55+ years (65% increase) and those aged 25-54 years (61%).

Table 9: Number and percentage of people participating in adult health checks

	2013	2016
People aged 15-24 years	11.1% (13 of 117)	39.7% (46 of 116)
People aged 25-54 years	15.2% (31 of 204)	67.7% (136 of 201)
People aged 55+ years	46.4% (13 of 28)	84.8% (28 of 33)

This increase is consistent with the period in which Children's Ground provided targeted health promotion support in Kakadu which included supporting adults to attend health checks. Between 2010 and 2014 across the Northern Territory, there was also a trend of increased adult participation in health checks. There is no publicly available data beyond 2014 to determine whether the increase in Jabiru data reflects or is larger than the NT trend.

In evaluation interviews, families referred to the support provided with local clinical health appointments and support navigating the hospital systems. The excerpt below was taken from interviews conducted by the external evaluator (MCRI) with Children's Ground Bininj staff (who are also families):

"CG [Children's Ground] would go to the medical clinic with families because families sometimes didn't trust the clinics or were too scared to go. They also sometimes didn't understand the information given (by the doctors or nurses)."

Supporting the wellbeing of children also requires supporting the families that surround them - this is critical in creating environments for wellbeing and safety. In recognition of this and the level of grief and trauma experienced by children and families, a specialist trauma informed counsellor was part of the Family Health and Wellbeing team and was available for families. Table 10 shows the number of children, young people and adults who engaged with the counsellor in 2015 and 2016. This does not include group sessions run with children and families within the learning programs.

Table 10: Individuals engaged in social/emotional wellbeing support by year

	2015	2016
0-8 years	31	38
9-17 years	35	26
18-24 years	27	33
25+ years	65	73
TOTAL	158	170

The counsellor was embedded as part of the daily Children's Ground environments, in learning settings and at the community centre, and spent time developing relationships with children and families, creating the conditions for trauma responsive counselling and mental health promotion. The counsellor also worked in formal partnership with the Jabiru Area School to support at-risk primary school aged children.

The counsellor reported that social and emotional wellbeing support was actively sought by individuals and families and was provided where people wanted - where they felt safe and comfortable. This included in the community centre, Children's Ground offices and in people's homes. The counsellor undertook a total of 256 home visits from August 2014 to March 2017, with an average of 28 home visits per quarter across the years.

The counsellor's approach was both preventative and responsive. Social and Emotional health promotion sessions were run with all children and families; some specific families were targeted when needs were identified at any given time. Where trauma was acute for any child and family, the counsellor provided child and family therapeutic support.

Issues and worries commonly raised with the counsellor related to health, alcohol and cannabis use, family violence and fighting, unresolved grief and loss, separation from family, conflict in kinship and marital relationships, child safety and wellbeing, school attendance, work related stress, housing, money and loss of culture and traditional knowledge.

The counsellor and all Children's Ground staff also provided emotional and logistical support across family groups and the whole community during periods of grief, sorry business and community conflict. The community level impact of these stressful occurrences is reported further in the next section.



Summary of changes for families

Children's Ground evidenced improved and high engagement of families in their children's learning and wellbeing - 100% of children had family actively engaged in their learning and wellbeing.

Children's Ground was able to successfully engage employment of adults who had previously experienced long-term unemployment. Employment of adults also positively impacted the level of engagement of families supporting the learning of their children and grandchildren.

Families' health and wellbeing were supported through increased access to family health promotion and, with support from Children's Ground, families experienced reduced barriers and increased engagement with health systems. Mental health and social and emotional wellbeing services were sought and used by all age groups within the community regularly.

Evidence shows that families and the home environment are the key influences on child learning and wellbeing. This includes family engagement in children's learning, family employment and family health. Children's Ground evidenced change in all three areas, critical to children's long-term learning and wellbeing.

Change and impact for community



First Nations Australians are more likely to live in the most disadvantaged areas, with 48 per cent living in the bottom fifth most disadvantaged Local Government Area (LGAs), compared to 18 per cent of non-Indigenous people³².

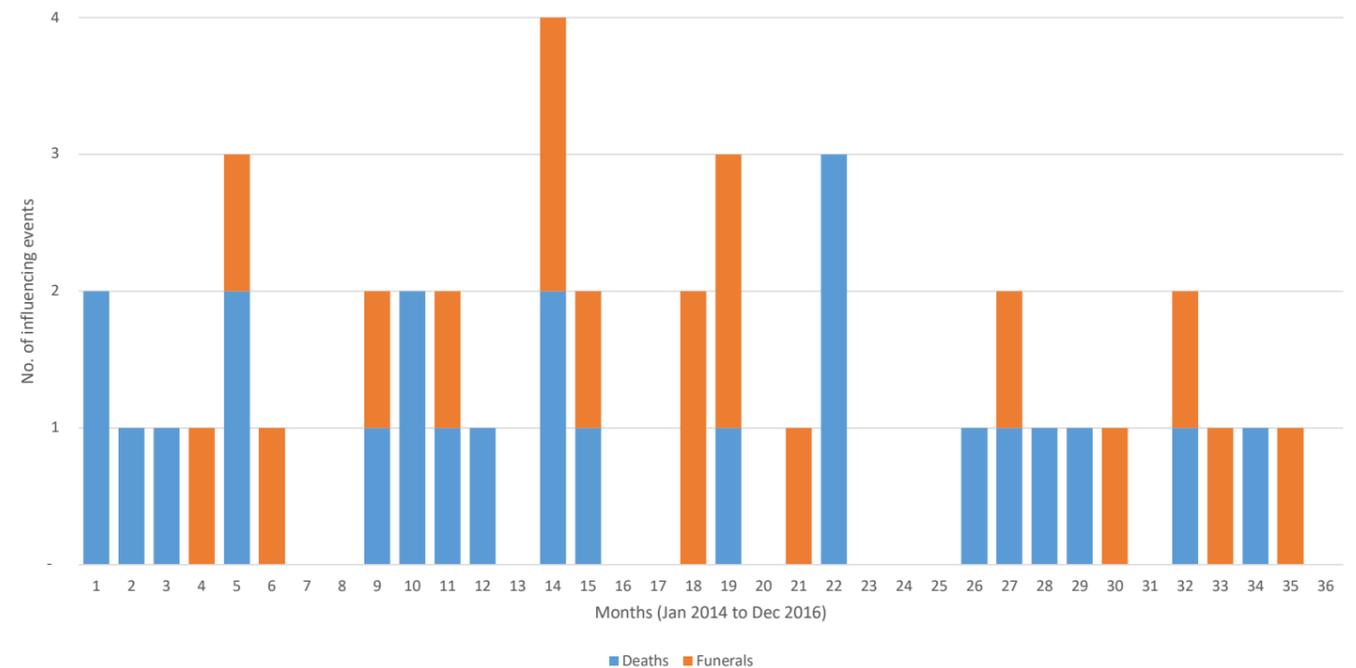
First Nations communities experience complex environments of disadvantage that impact safety and wellbeing and are overrepresented in all key areas of community stress including unemployment, mental health and suicide, racism, exclusion, homelessness, substance misuse and family violence. These are all symptoms of communities that live with complex disadvantage and trauma. Changing these realities over the long-term informs the 25-year strategic agenda of Children's Ground.

Kakadu West Arnhem is classified in the first quintile for Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, meaning it ranks as one of the most disadvantaged areas. Jabiru town is ranked as the area with least disadvantage within Kakadu³³ - most likely due to the mining population.

Children's Ground is a whole of community approach, with principles of inclusion and safety. Graph 8 presents a picture of the extent of grief and loss experienced across the community throughout the period of Children's Ground operations. It shows the generally unrecognised constant grief and loss that many First Nations families and communities experience in their lives, linked to social and economic disadvantage.

For the KWA community, funerals and sorry business were a regular part of life. Twenty-three deaths were recorded by Children's Ground staff between January 2014 and March 2017. These were deaths of people immediately connected to children and families involved with Children's Ground. Almost half of these were under the age of 50 and died prematurely. Ill-health, grief, loss and trauma have a direct impact on the learning and development of children and the wellbeing of the community.

Graph 8: Community Stress/Influencing events - Kakadu West Arnhem



In addition to constant grief and loss, regular community conflict occurred between family groups and communities across the region. Children's Ground reported increased conflict and family stress at time of royalty payments, which were regular through the year due to both mining and National Park payments. Throughout Children's Ground operations, 12 major community conflicts occurred that impacted child and family engagement in learning, health promotion and employment.

Children's Ground is a 25-year approach which recognises that change will take a generation due to the level of stress and grief in most First Nations communities. Within such a small community nearly everyone in KWA was affected by any death. The impact of constant trauma affected the community and each family and child's learning and wellbeing.

³² ABS. 2018. Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2016
³³ ABS. 2016. Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia

Children's Ground's longitudinal evaluation framework identified three key outcome areas at a community level:

- **The community values its place and heritage and continues to grow**
- **The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity**
- **The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity**

Long-term change in these outcomes could only be realised when the generation of children growing up with Children's Ground became young adults, had their own families and were the critical mass within the community who enjoyed cultural, social and political opportunity and empowerment.

Families wanted to create a different future for their children in the long-term. To achieve this, Children's Ground worked with a critical mass of children and families to address the key social, cultural and economic determinants for wellbeing. Progress in these collective outcomes sought to achieve broad scale community change over the long term so that children were born, grew, developed, learned and lived with opportunity and wellbeing.

The following presents targeted strategies and changes over the period of operations only. They do not assume long-term impact of these changes.

The community values its place and heritage and continues to grow

KEY FINDINGS

- **162 people were involved in approximately 170 community governance meetings throughout operations in KWA**
- **80% of families reported that Children's Ground listened to what Bininj wanted**
- **332 people engaged in cultural activities (on country learning, Bininj Kunborrk, cultural camps)**

Valuing place and heritage is about a community feeling proud and engaged in their community. It is built through people knowing and celebrating the social and cultural strength of their community. First Nations communities who have suffered extensive trauma and social stress often report that the main community event that brings people together is funerals.

One community member reported:

"Because family didn't meet up in one place...only see each other in funeral...For Children's Ground that's what it's like every day. See families around children, that's what it's about."

Bininj family member, 2017

Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

Change in relation to this long-term outcome has been measured using the following progress indicators:

- Increased First Nations voice in local decision making
- Increased access to and engagement in Bininj cultural practices
- Increased opportunities for intergenerational engagement between families in safe and positive environments

They should be considered alongside findings from the child and family outcome sections in respect to the changes in Bininj voice, cultural engagement and empowerment.



Community-led governance

Community governance included core structures and processes that valued cultural leadership and encouraged and enabled community decision making throughout operations.

Bininj people were involved in designing, delivering and evaluating all service areas. Bininj governance determined that families, elders and senior cultural people are together culturally responsible for teaching and raising each child. Community meetings where key decisions were made

occurred in first language as well as English. These meetings were supported by early years learning meetings where Bininj teachers led resource development, language and cultural curriculum development for early years sessions.

The intergenerational community centre was the physical place where community governance visibly occurred. However, governance and community decision making also occurred daily in all Children's Ground environments.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased First Nations voice in local decision-making

162 people were involved in approximately 170 community governance meetings throughout operations in KWA.

Families were asked, 'Do you feel Children's Ground listens to what Bininj wants?'

20 of 25 people interviewed responded with "yes" and/or described how. Of these, not all reported regularly attending community meetings yet felt that Children's Ground listen to Bininj.

Bininj families reported:

"Bininj make decisions. They just let us go for it with ideas and decisions. They put Bininj first. Bininj ideas count. Bininj make the rules. Bininj rules are for all of Children's Ground [the organisational code of conduct]."

"Kids and families more happier and everybody joining in and making decisions together."

"Bininj approved Balanda staff. We had to make sure they were ok. We had to be certain."

Bininj families, 2017

All six local services reported that Children's Ground was visibly Bininj-led. All 10 Balanda staff interviewed reported that empowering Bininj people through hearing and responding to their voice as the biggest change and as a driver of other changes.

Community governance was an important systemic enabler in ensuring Bininj decision-making and reportedly led to increased engagement in employment and services. Therefore, Bininj governance was found to be a key contributing factor to the building of the social, cultural and economic capital across Kakadu West Arnhem during Children's Ground's operations.

"For the kids growing up seeing that [Bininj agency] is everything. It helps self-esteem, it helps with being able to stand strong and to hold onto their own language - and the value in that...their future history can be changed, that there's a new story that they can be part of."

Children's Ground Balanda staff member, 2017



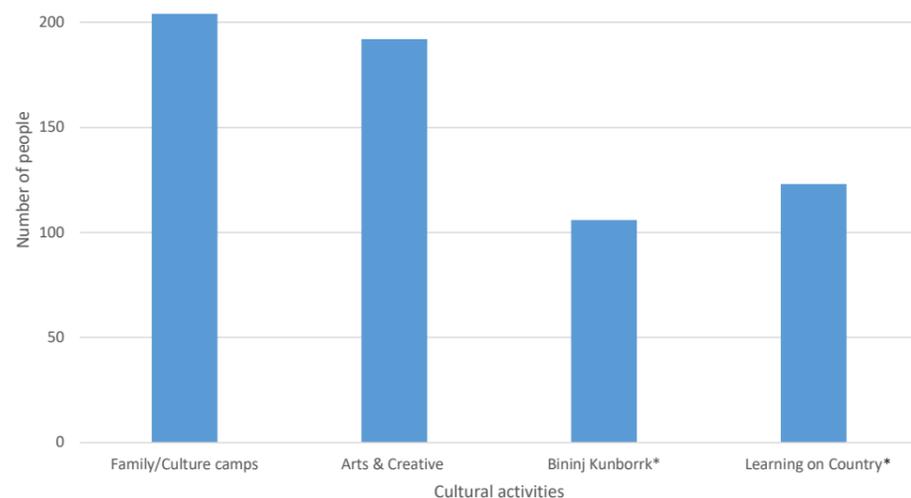
Valuing of culture and heritage

The respect for, and opportunity to engage in cultural practices and to apply cultural knowledge systems was the strongest theme to emerge from interviews with families – irrespective of the focus of the question asked.

Bininj language and culture was supported across all five of the Children's Ground integrated service platforms. Content and support were structured to privilege the identity, culture and language of the community.

Graph 9 shows the types of cultural practices and activities and the number of Bininj children, families and community members engaged through Children's Ground.

Graph 9: Number of Bininj people participating in cultural activities from 2014-2017



Note: Includes people of all ages and permanent residents, frequent and infrequent visitors

*Adult participation in Learning on Country was not thoroughly and consistently recorded, nor was engagement in Bininj Kunborrk- these data should be considered conservative.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased access to and engagement in Bininj cultural practices

Through Children's Ground, children, families and the community increased their participation in cultural practices. Graph 9 shows the number of people who participated in cultural practices through Children's Ground.

Bininj Kunborrk had not been practiced for years before Children's Ground supported cultural leaders to start dancing again and to teach this to the children. Graph 9 shows that over 100 people of all ages engaged in Bininj Kunborrk through Children's Ground.

Families and the community reported increased engagement in cultural practices for children, young people and adults.

"Children's Ground supported culture and activities and family and ceremony and funerals. We got lots of support for culture. Good support. We didn't get that kind of support growing up. We love seeing our kids getting what we didn't."

"Gamak [good]. They like learning about culture...Bininj Kunborrk...support Bininj to go to ceremony and camping out and funerals... [Children's Ground] helped make it happen more. Gamak."

"We teach them together. The bark and the painting, and when we had learning on country. We had the camping and all those things. We showing them special places. Singing and dancing. The women would get bush tucker for us. Afterwards we would explain to the kids all the bush tucker stories."

"We feel proud that we now know our culture better and can teach our kids. We see them learning what we teach them. They are learning quickly."

Bininj families, 2017

The external evaluation survey found that:

- 100% (10) of local service providers and 92% (12 of 13) of staff reported that 'Children's Ground values cultural and community expertise'.
- 70% (7 of 10) of local service providers agreed or strongly agreed that 'Children's Ground always thinks about the old and new ways of doing things' (Bininj and Balanda). Three responded 'Don't Know'.

Increasing social connection and social capital

Children's Ground aimed to provide increased opportunities and experiences for the Bininj community to engage and connect in safe, positive and social environments – coming together around their children. This included providing a range of activities for children, young people and adults that brought different clans and family groups together at events, celebrations, cultural learning and activities.

Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased opportunities for intergenerational engagement between families in safe and positive environments

Family and community engagement in safe and positive social environments and activities have been reported in the child and family outcome section.

When asked to 'think about activities for children, young people and families, and how it compared to before Children's Ground started':

- 23 of 24 reported 'more' or 'a lot more' activities for children.
- 22 of 24 reported 'more' or 'a lot more' activities for young people.
- 20 of 23 reported 'more' or 'a lot more' activities for families.

The community reported:

"Good for family and community. Making families stronger, and it's good for kids to see the family like that, it's bringing the community together, it's good for families to be one and together, instead of separate."

"I was here before Children's Ground started. Before we were doing nothing. Children's Ground comes along, kids were coming into the centre. 15-year-old kids were here. Now hardly any who are isolated, Children's Ground made us less isolated."

"Gamak. Family spend more time with kids... [Children's Ground] support us to help one another. And help kids."
Bininj families, 2017



The community enjoys employment and economic opportunity

KEY FINDINGS

- Increased access to economic opportunities for Bininj people across KWA
- 74 of 87 employees lived in the small communities outside the Jabiru township
- 112 people were engaged as artists within the Arts enterprise

Progress Indicator: Measuring change and short-term impact

In addition to the progress indicators presented in the family outcome section, change in relation to this long-term outcome has been measured using the following progress indicator:

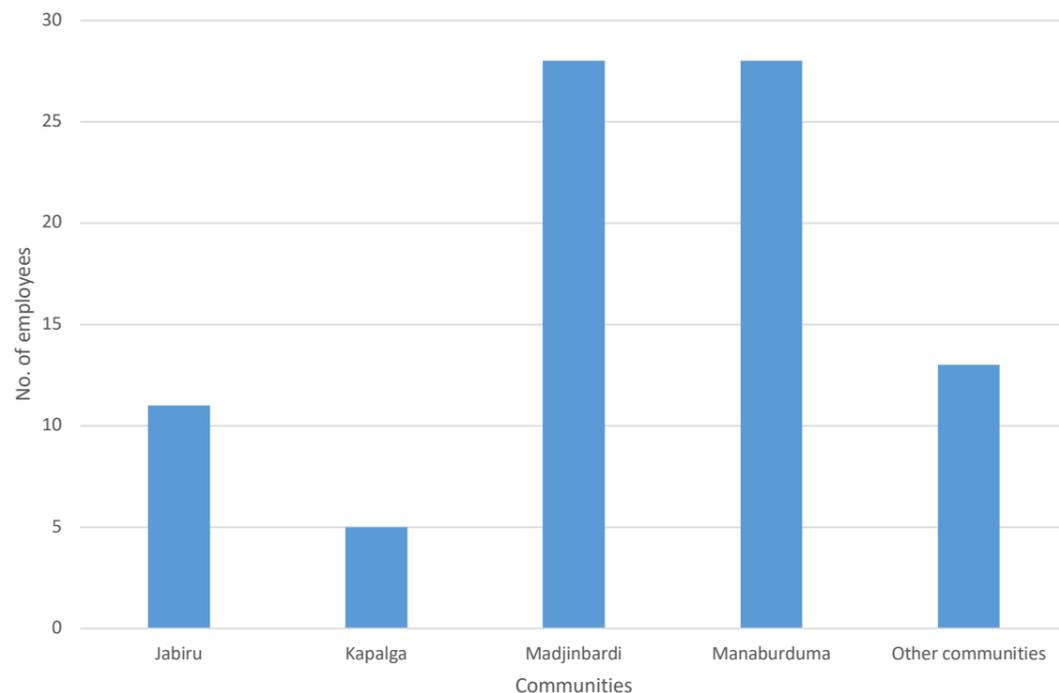
- Increased access to and engagement in economic opportunities.

Over 25 years, the long-term outcome that is being sought is for a critical mass of children successfully exiting education into adulthood and employment with economic independence.

Evaluation data demonstrates that over the three years of operations, Children's Ground increased economic opportunities for the community across the region through employment, enterprise, financial literacy and management support. Graph 10 shows the number of people engaged in employment with Children's Ground across the region.



Graph 10: Number of people engaged in employment across the region from 2013 to 2017, by their community of residence



Communities where less than five people were employed with Children's Ground have been collated for confidentiality purposes. 'Other communities' includes: Anmarrkananga (Cannon Hill), Buffalo Farm, Djirrbiyuk, Mamukala, Paradise Farm, Patonga, Rangers HQ.



Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased access to and engagement in economic opportunities

Employment, financial management and short-term economic impact for families has been presented under the family outcomes section.

As previously reported, 87 Bininj people were employed at Children's Ground over the period, with approximately 81% of these employees not working at the time they commenced.

In addition to this, Graph 10 above shows that Children's Ground successfully engaged people in employment from across the region and that the majority of employees lived in outstations, not in Jabiru. This was not reflected in the analysis of the ABS Census employment data, which found an increase in the employment rate for people living in Jabiru and only a marginal increase within the surrounding outstations.

Local enterprise

The two local enterprises established through Children's Ground included the arts enterprise 'Bininj Gunwarra' and music enterprise the Black Rock Band. From July 2014 to June 2017, a total of 112 people were engaged as artists within the Arts enterprise.

Children's Ground found that employment of adults made a significant contribution to the engagement of children in learning as well as building the social and cultural capital within the community.

At a community level, the high engagement of adults participating in employment changed the status quo. Children aged 0-5 years experienced adults working as a norm, rather than being unemployed - only on Centrelink or without income.

The community is safe, inclusive and respects diversity

KEY FINDINGS

- **Intergenerational community and learning centre was created as a place of safety, culture and wellbeing by families for three years**
- **86% of families interviewed reported Children's Ground as a safe place for the community**
- **Bininj reported improved individual and community safety in relation to cultural, emotional and environmental safety**

Safety relates to cultural, emotional, physical and environmental safety. First Nations Australian children experience compromised safety through direct experience and secondary exposure to trauma and threats to safety. Direct experiences include overcrowding, unsafe housing, physical abuse, neglect and exposure to violence and racism.

In 2014-15, Indigenous women were 32 times as likely to be hospitalised due to family violence as non-Indigenous women, while Indigenous men were 23 times as likely to be hospitalised as non-Indigenous men. In 2015-16, Indigenous children were seven times more likely to be the subject of substantiated child abuse or neglect as non-Indigenous children.³⁴

In 2011, First Nations children were 5.4 times as likely as non-Indigenous children to experience a hospital separation for assault and eight times as likely to be the subject of substantiated child abuse or neglect,³⁵ with the NT having the highest number of child protection reports per 1000 children in the country.³⁶

Safe and inclusive communities are underpinned by strength in social, economic and cultural capital of individuals and collectively as a community. Over the long-term, safe and inclusive communities are expected to be achieved through the collective outcomes for children, families and communities.

Progress indicators: Measuring change and short-term impact

In addition to changes in community governance, economic opportunity and building of social and cultural capital reported above, short term impact was measured through:

- Increased opportunities for people to identify and respond to local safety issues.
- Increased experiences of safety.
- Improved environmental health and safety.

This section reports on any change that resulted from Children's Ground's approach to supporting the community to create places of physical, emotional and community safety.

How Children's Ground sought and achieved cultural safety in service, support and employment environments has been thoroughly presented throughout this report and will not be reported on in this section.



³⁴ AIHW. 2018. Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia

³⁵ Atkinson, J. 2013. Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children; AIHW. 2013. Resource sheet no. 21 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse

³⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2018. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2018

Community development and empowerment

Community governance, empowerment and valuing first language and culture enabled the Bininj community to lead the creation of places of physical and emotional safety that were culturally safe and reflective.

Local governance supported Bininj families to decide the rules and lead the creation of safe and positive environments for their children within Children's Ground.

Families specifically mentioned being part of deciding the rules for Children's Ground.

"...came here and opened Children's Ground. We make the list of rules and talked about lots of things."

"I helped make the rules at start of Children's Ground. Part of the leadership group."

"The rules, no argument, no drinking, no drunks, and other things."

"Because we know when we walk into the Children's Ground we are all the same and we come as one big family. No one is different. Everything is equal."

Bininj community, 2017

In addition to local governance, community development and empowerment was one of the five core integrated service areas. Community Development and Wellbeing included working with people to identify and respond to local priorities for their community.



Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased opportunities for people to identify and respond to local safety issues

In addition to the operational governance of Children's Ground, community development was aimed at supporting outstations to identify local priorities. In all Children's Ground community development work, the key principles of safety and inclusion were reinforced and promoted.

In one area, community meetings and activities resulted in over 50 people participating in community visioning and environmental health, which led to a large Community Housing Project (detailed further on) to address environmental and housing safety.

"I feel proud of what I have been able to do for my community."

"No bad things came from it, only good things."

"It was good to work together, Bininj and Balanda. We helped each other really fast which is really good. This is what we Bininj want, everyone working together."

Community members, 2017

Similar community development and empowerment approaches were undertaken in other smaller local communities.

Environments of Safety

Community governance and environments of safety were explicit operating principles for Children's Ground. The community was supported to lead the creation of places of physical and cultural safety for their children within Children's Ground. Through community governance, safety was prioritised, promoted and actively managed. This was found to be the first building block to engaging children and families.

All families (25), all Children's Ground Balanda staff (10) and two local services interviewed referred to Children's Ground as a place of safety for children, families and the community.



Findings for Progress Indicator: Increased experience of safety

In evaluation interviews with families, 19 of 22 people referred to Children's Ground being a safe place for the community. Safety was reported for children as well as for young people considered at risk in the community. Two key themes emerged: Children's Ground being 'a safe place for wurdurd (children)' and a place of 'no argument/violence/drinking/drugs'.

Families identified social changes that are contributors to places of safety for children, families and the community more broadly:

"A safe place where we listen to each other. We are talking about good things, and not come up with bad things."

"For wurdurd and Bininj it was safe place - everywhere it was safe."

"Good to see things happen for our young babies, our young kids. Giving them that space, that they can feel happy and loved, you know, safe. They don't have to worry...some of that stuff they never had in their life before...they need it for their growing. It helps them to grow." (2015)

"There was nothing just sitting down and doing nothing, no school for little ones, Yawkyawk and Yawurrinj nothing to do. Old people nowhere to go. People smoking gunja, drinking. When Children's Ground started people have things to do and there is less smoking, drinking, gunja. They get work and get more responsible."

"Petrol sniffing, cards and kids drinking, when Children's Ground starts they help."

"A lot of things changed. Happy, no sadness. Helping other Bininj. Balanda helping Bininj. Bininj helping Balanda. Working together with love. It's gamuk [good]."

"Wurdurd always happy when jump off the bus and when they walk in. They always have a smile on their face because the kids know it is a safe place for them to play." (2015)

"Children's Ground is part of every wurdurd's life. Kids feel safe in the arms of Children's Ground."

Bininj families, 2015 and 2017

These changes did not occur for all families, nor to the same degree for families. However, it is indicative of social change within the community.

Staff reported observing that, when it appeared families felt safe and comfortable in the environment, they felt confident for their children to engage in learning:

"We found when people felt safe that's when people come, why they come and it's why they protect it because it's what people are always seeking."

Balanda staff member, 2017

The two local services reported:

[Asked about observed changes in children's health]

"Yeah look, certainly their safety. Their personal safety, social and emotional safety...and their physical health...with Children's Ground, you know, someone there to help them check in on that every day."

"When there's been big family arguments I know behind the scenes that within Children's Ground there's a lot of support and facilitating going on in there between families because they want it to stop as well. And I think a little bit more time on that, you know, if there was more time available that in the long run they could break some sort of cycle."

"...when there's lack of safety for people, Children's Ground are integral, and I say Children's Ground as the Bininj and Balanda are integral to re-establishing that. It's through that agency that that happens."

[asked about observed changes for community]

"The safety for our kids, absolutely. Their [Children's Ground] ability to engage with family and community and remind them that this is about the kids. The Balandas and the other Bininj who aren't involved [in conflict], there's no other agency in town that can do that."

Local services, 2017



Over 25 years, Children's Ground sought to use Jabiru Police District data as an indicative baseline and long-term indicator for any change in community safety. Table 11 shows the picture of offences committed across the Jabiru region from 2011 to 2016 (calendar years). This represents all offences across the region and cannot be separated by Indigenous status.

Table 11: Jabiru Police District offences committed from 2011 to 2016 (calendar years).

Crimes against a person	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total offences against the person	26	22	44	49	33	35
Year on Year (YOY) growth		-15%	100%	11%	-33%	6%
Property crime	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Total property offences	78	95	71	74	67	45
YOY growth		22%	-25%	4%	-9%	-33%

The data shows a reduction in offences against the person between 2013 and 2016 following an increase in 2014. Property crime reduced significantly between 2013 and 2016. While this was during the period of Children's Ground operations, the inability to analyse this by offender makes this difficult to attribute meaningfully.

Environmental safety

Environmental health and safety were identified as key priorities across the community, with many families in KWA reporting overcrowding, unsafe housing, inadequate access to functional hygiene facilities and water insecurity. The largest outstation in Kakadu did not have a secure supply of water during the three years of operation. This can lead to serious population health issues and can facilitate the spread of a range of illnesses.

Addressing insufficient and inadequate housing is a key social determinant, requiring attention from all levels of Government. Children's Ground is not a core provider of Housing services. As such, Children's Ground could only act in a community development role to support housing security and environmental health - and support the community to advocate for both.

Children's Ground's environmental health and safety responses included public health community initiatives such as animal management, water security, repairs of basic health hardware, washing facilities and safe community areas. It also included environmental health and safety in individual and family health plans, such as cleaning of homes and surrounds, housing referrals, gardens and dust suppression.

Partnerships with relevant organisations were critical to the delivery of environmental health management strategies to address the serious issues that children and families lived with each day.



Findings for Progress Indicator: Improved environmental health and safety

From 2015 to 2016, 192 environmental health discussions occurred with families and communities. Environmental health surveys were undertaken in communities, with a total of 104 community members surveyed in Madjinbardi (61) and Manaburduma (43). From these, 98 environmental health interventions were implemented with communities, including home and community clean-ups.

Two major initiatives focused on housing and animal management:

Housing: In 2016, three communities identified the state of their housing as their most important local priority. House audits were undertaken by the Department of Environmental Health and Children's Ground's Community Development team, with householders present and leading the process - this resulted in wide scale maintenance and service repairs for households.

Animal management: In 2016, after feedback at a community meeting and consultation with a GP at the Jabiru health clinic, it was decided to address the state of the pets in Kakadu - a total of 45 dogs, 7 cats and 2 pigs were desexed in the 15 outstations.

Responses to some of the key risks to health through housing, animal control and community health promotion led to improved health literacy, empowerment, and skills development. Child, family and community health and wellbeing may improve in the short-term and potentially in the longer-term.



Community Housing Health initiative

In one outstation, water security was seriously compromised. No permanent water infrastructure existed, despite the outstation being one of the largest in Kakadu and in existence for nearly 50 years. The Health and Wellbeing and Community Development teams worked together with the community and local services in a targeted initiative to improve the living conditions within homes to contribute to better health and education outcomes for children.

This initiative was identified and led by the community. Children's Ground secured the assistance of 'Fair Tradies' to audit all homes and carry out repairs as needed with the community. This project was undertaken in partnership with GAC, Warnbi Aboriginal Corporation and Northern and Remote Construction.

The Audit of nine homes identified that all occupied homes were overcrowded, had inadequate food storage and cooking facilities and had experienced serious disruptions to water and power supplies over the past six months. All homes had inadequate washing and showering facilities, with no hot water and no appropriate places in which to wash young children.

The Fair Tradies team worked with each household, always alongside community members and the health promotion team, providing mentoring and up-skilling throughout the process. Completion of the project saw all houses cleaned out, plumbing and electrical circuits repaired, new shower recesses fitted, hot water facilities and connections restored, cooktops and cooking infrastructure fitted and the completion and fit out of a new community-owned resource centre. All homes had access to hot water, a working shower, a new



toilet, a hand basin, a laundry trough, a kitchen sink and an adequate place to cook. Major electrical and other safety issues were addressed. Rotting walls were removed and replaced, broken plasterboard was re-sheeted, exposed cables and piping were safely covered and all homes were fitted with secure front and back doors and lockable rooms.

Community members led decision making and were involved in undertaking repairs and maintenance. Children were also engaged in the work and picking paint colours for their houses. The project had an impact on reducing risk, improving daily physical health, personal safety, child and family health and wellbeing and empowerment. Community members commented:

"Those boys did more in those two weeks than what had been done out here for years."

"Those boys fixed my kitchen for me and helped with those cockroaches. Now we can use the kitchen, proper one."

Summary of changes for communities

Over the period, there was a reported strengthening in the social, cultural and economic capital and wellbeing across the community. Children's Ground created regular and active local governance and increased engagement in cultural life. Increased economic opportunities and wellbeing were also reported. Improved safety related to governance, increased environments of safety and housing security. This resulted in increased safety for children and families. Cultural safety and empowerment appeared to be a key driver of community level change.



Analysis and discussion

This evaluation marked three years of the 25-year Children's Ground strategy. The first year of operations was a period of phased implementation, followed by two years of the full integrated Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform being well established.

Over a three year period in Kakadu, the Children's Ground Approach evidenced positive change across eleven indicators for children, families and at a community level. The evaluation suggests that, given the right conditions, it is possible to improve early years learning and primary learning outcomes, employment, cultural wellbeing, family health and wellbeing and community safety in communities that have faced extreme and complex intergenerational disadvantage. The evidence also suggests that these factors are interlinked and that positive change in one indicator impacts improved outcomes in other indicators.

As a prevention and strengths-based approach, ensuring children have the best start to life is critical to Children's Ground's 25-year strategy. Research shows that increased experiences of trauma and life stress in early childhood can have a lifelong and devastating impact on wellbeing.³⁷ Many First Nations children are born with intergenerational stress and trauma, which is compounded by complex life stress from their earliest years. They are overrepresented in poor educational outcomes³⁸, health morbidity³⁹, child and infant death⁴⁰, child removal⁴¹ and are underrepresented in engagement in early childhood learning⁴². Their families are over-represented in the criminal justice system⁴³, unemployment⁴⁴, early death⁴⁵ and homelessness and social housing⁴⁶. Communities as a whole experience trauma and stress which all impacts children's early years and life trajectory.

Key changes evidenced in this report have demonstrated early impact and progress for children that are at odds with national trends. They demonstrate that Children's Ground made progress towards key national targets in education, employment and social wellbeing for First Nations children and families – in areas where no significant gains have been made in the Northern Territory after 11 years of Closing the Gap reporting.⁴⁷

The Northern Territory has the lowest levels of children participating in early years learning and Children's Ground successfully engaged a completely new cohort of children and their families in early years learning for the first time. In partnership with the local school, 100% participation in early childhood was achieved for children aged four to five years in the region. Despite living with multiple barriers and a history of inequity and exclusion, children engaged and grew

their participation over time. This new cohort of children, who were not previously accessing locally available early childhood services, experienced the strong and positive foundations needed to enjoy lifelong learning and wellbeing.

A 2017 Inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs stated: "The persistent gap in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students indicates that, in many cases, the education system is not meeting the needs of Indigenous students"⁴⁸. This reiterated the 2013 Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory: A Share in the Future which concluded that "the intractable problems in the delivery and conduct of education for this very disadvantaged group of young people require a strategy covering all the many elements affecting student outcomes"⁴⁹.

Children's Ground is designed to address a range of areas impacting the wellbeing of children through their life course. Creating meaningful access to early years learning, health promotion and wellbeing for communities excluded from the existing system was the first part of the strategy. The evaluation evidence suggests it was integrated service delivery that supported not only child learning outcomes, but outcomes more broadly for children, families and community in health, economic and social capital.

The family and home environments are evidenced as the most important influencer in early childhood learning and wellbeing.⁵⁰ Children's Ground's intergenerational approach promoted family engagement in all areas of their children's life with an intergenerational community centre creating a central place of safety and inclusion. The integration of health within learning environments and employment improved nutrition and enabled a daily focus on wellbeing across generations.

Community governance and employment were found to be important systemic enablers and reportedly led to increased family engagement in early years learning alongside their children as well as increased employment of local people and engagement in services. In turn, employment was a key contributor to the strength of local governance and family engagement and was linked to increased children's engagement in learning. Both governance and employment provided the cultural safety in service delivery that afforded children the right and opportunity to learn in their first language and about their culture – and for families to engage with children's learning, health and wellbeing – not excluded due to language and cultural barriers.

Children's Ground's focus on first culture and language is supported by research evidence which shows that where a single focus on education for Aboriginal children involves the exclusion of their cultural and family context, it leads to exclusion and compounds social and emotional issues. There is also evidence that when first culture and language are privileged, academic, social and cultural outcomes all improve.^{51,52}

A key finding was Children's Ground's ability to be flexible in response to the community and its cultural context. There were a significant number of family deaths and community conflicts throughout the three years impacting the community. During these periods, Children's Ground was flexible enough to support and respond to these realities experienced by the community. This supported children and families to return to learning and employment. In similar circumstances where no support is provided, disengagement for extended periods of time is common. Children's Ground's ability to integrate learning, health, economic, community and cultural development into the broader context and influencing factors in people's lives appeared to assist in retaining engagement of children in learning and adults in employment over the three years.

While the CG Approach is designed to promote local First Nations employment and build a sustainable local workforce over the long-term, the high level of interest and engagement in employment from the community was not expected. Over the period, the employment of 87 Bininj people contributed to the Kakadu region surpassing the NT trend in Aboriginal employment participation. The broad scale employment of families was an outcome of, as well as a contributor to, a range of other outcomes, including governance and safety. Evaluation evidence demonstrated that when families engaged in employment, their children's engagement in learning increased.

Over the period, the daily opportunities and engagement of children and families in areas of governance, early childhood, education, employment, community safety and wellbeing increased. Governance, employment and privileging Bininj culture were found to be key contributing factors to building social, cultural and economic capital across KWA during Children's Ground operations.

This evaluation demonstrates that change is achievable, even in the short-term, when a service system is genuinely First Nations led, when first language and culture is privileged and when integrated services respond to the complex social, economic and cultural determinants of health, wellbeing and life.



³⁷ Tamayo T, Christian H, Rathmann W. 2010. Impact of early psychosocial factors (childhood socioeconomic factors and adversities) on future risk of type 2 diabetes, metabolic disturbances and obesity: a systematic review. BMC Public Health 2010;10:525

³⁸ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). 2018. ARACY Report Card 2018; Northern Territory Government Department of Education. 2017. 2016-17 Annual Report

³⁹ Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council. 2017. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2017 Report. AHMAC, Canberra

⁴⁰ Northern Territory Child Deaths Review and Prevention Committee. 2017. Annual Report 2016-2017. Office of the Children's Commissioner, Darwin

⁴¹ Office of the Children's Commissioner. 2017. Annual Report 2016-2017, Northern Territory Children's Commissioner. Office of the Children's Commissioner, Northern Territory Government.

⁴² Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2019. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2019

⁴³ ABS (at 30 June, 2016). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Prisoners

⁴⁴ ABS. 2014-15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014 General Social Survey

⁴⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2018. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2018.

⁴⁶ AIHW. 2015. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

⁴⁷ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2019. Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2019

⁴⁸ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs. December 2017. The power of education: From surviving to thriving. Educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

⁴⁹ Wilson, B. 2013. A share in the future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory.

⁵⁰ Moore, T., McDonald, M. and McHugh-Dillon, H. 2015. Evidence review: Early childhood development and the social determinants of health inequities. Prepared for VicHealth by the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

⁵¹ United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation. 2012. Tinsiri Siribodhi Why Language Matters for the Millennium Development Goals

⁵² Pinnock, H. and Vijayakumar, G. 2009. Language and Education, The Missing Link, How the language used in schools threatens the achievement of Education for All. Save the Children and the CfBT Education Trust.



Part Two: Systems change and impact

The 2017 Productivity Commission into Human Services Reform⁵³ identified that the current service systems are broken. Closing the Gap and other reports show minimal to no improvement in outcomes for First Nations people across their life span over the past 10 years. For First Nations people, the existing system compounds the enduring impact of colonisation. This continues to be catastrophic for many children, families and communities.

The CG Approach is a system designed to reform what and how service systems are implemented to overcome extreme intergenerational poverty and inequity in Australia. Children's Ground integrates key services to tackle social, structural and economic determinants and inequities that affect children living with extreme poverty and to provide the opportunities any child needs for lifetime wellbeing.

The CG Approach responds to the multi-level influences on children's development from pre-birth to 25 years. Its design is informed by leading Western evidence and practice, by First Nations knowledge and practice, and by the experience and realities of First Nations communities and those experiencing intergenerational disadvantage more broadly.

Fundamental to the CG Approach is enfranchising and empowering First Nations people as designers, deliverers and evaluators of the systems and services designed to support their children, families and community.

The CG Approach reforms the system through five key structural reforms (system enablers), five integrated areas of service delivery (the 'what'), and a set of practice principles (the 'how') that underpin strategic delivery to achieve community empowerment and ownership for long-term impact. Figure 10 depicts how all elements of the CG Approach work together to create a new system and way of working that focuses on long-term change.

Figure 10: The Children's Ground Approach



This section evaluates the Children's Ground Approach in the context of these key evaluation questions:

1. Was the CG Approach implemented as intended? In respect to:
 - The 'how' (practice principles).
 - The 'what' (integrated service delivery of the Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform).
 - Systems reform.
2. Which system enablers contributed to process and implementation effectiveness (Governance, Workforce, Service Delivery, Investment, Evaluation)?
3. Cost effectiveness and efficiency
4. How did the CG Approach contribute to changes?

⁵³ Productivity Commission. 2017. Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services, Report No. 85, Canberra.

Key Findings: What systems, service and practice change occurred in KWA?

“Children’s Ground made it happen by walking side by side. Sometimes you don’t see any change after such a small amount of space [three years] and time, but the changes were evident.”

Local service, 2017

Analysis of the KWA evaluation data showed that:

- Children’s Ground was implemented as intended and delivered a comprehensive system of services aligned with key practice principles underpinning the CG Approach.
- Children’s Ground did affect systems change that positively impacted the wellbeing of children, families and the community during the three year period of operations in Kakadu. This was achieved both by what Children’s Ground delivered and through partnerships with some key local services.
- The CG Approach is cost effective in achieving short-term change, which can be the building blocks for long-term change.
- Children’s Ground was not able to maintain the authorising environment to operate for 25 years.

The most significant systems, service and practice influencers found to be drivers and contributors of short-term impact and change were:

Practice reform: ‘How’ services are delivered			
Recognising first language and culture approaches facilitated engagement	Empowerment through local governance and workforce	Placed based, strengths-based, flexible design and delivery	Building and valuing relationships and being part of the community fabric
Service reform: ‘What’ services are delivered			
Effective delivery of five integrated services fundamental to prevention and responding to social, economic and cultural determinants for life opportunity and wellbeing		Service delivery and practice privileged cultural values, language and knowledge systems as well as Western/global knowledge and skills	
Systems reform: The conditions for change			
Each of the five systems enablers was influenced by and stimulated reform in other reform areas	Systems enablers created the conditions required for effective implementation and short-term impact for community	The CG Approach in KWA was cost-effective in the delivery of a place-based, integrated and prevention focused platform of services that were community led	

As anticipated, one of the most important design features of the CG Approach was found to be not only ‘what’ was delivered, but ‘how’ it was delivered, facilitated by systemic enablers that created the conditions and authorising environments for change in practice. The combination of these factors was critical in affecting systems change and short-term impact for children, families and the community.



Process Analysis: Implementation effectiveness

The process and implementation analysis was an important element in evaluating whether or not the CG Approach was implemented as intended in KWA.

Children’s Ground contracted the Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) to undertake an evaluation that focused on the integrity of how the practice principles were implemented by staff and the extent to which internal integration and collaboration with external local services was achieved. Quantitative and qualitative evaluation data in this section draws from both the MCRI and Children’s Ground evaluations (see Methods section for more information about evaluation participants).

Note that excerpts taken directly from MCRI’s evaluation report are in italics and blue in colour.

MCRI noted that the *combination of limited time and funds* meant that they undertook a point in time survey without the time to prepare and execute a comprehensive assessment (see Appendix two). Children’s Ground’s evaluation interviews complemented the MCRI survey and interviews with findings consistent with and supporting many of MCRI’s findings across all practice principles. Collectively, evaluation findings are representative of the staff and external stakeholder groups.

What Children’s Ground intended to do

The CG Approach has been described in sections throughout this report. This section briefly summarises the practice principles through which process and implementation effectiveness has been evaluated.

All elements of the CG Approach are interconnected and necessary to build towards achieving sustained change over a generation. Figure 11 articulates the practice principles and how they relate to service delivery (e.g. integrated service platform) and system enablers (e.g. governance).

Figure 11: What Children’s Ground intended to do over 25 years



Was the CG Approach implemented as intended?

Evaluation process/implementation findings relate to if and how the CG Approach was implemented as intended. These are presented under each principle.

It is important to note that, in KWA, all community governance meetings began with a discussion and reflection on each of the practice principles, including what each principle meant to people and how Children's Ground was working to each principle. This was considered key to implementation of the CG Approach. Throughout these conversations and processes, the practice principles were translated by families into Kunwinjku (the local language); both Kunwinjku English and the local English translation are included below.

Start early

Karri-ykarmmerren wurdurd kadberre (Start early with the little ones)

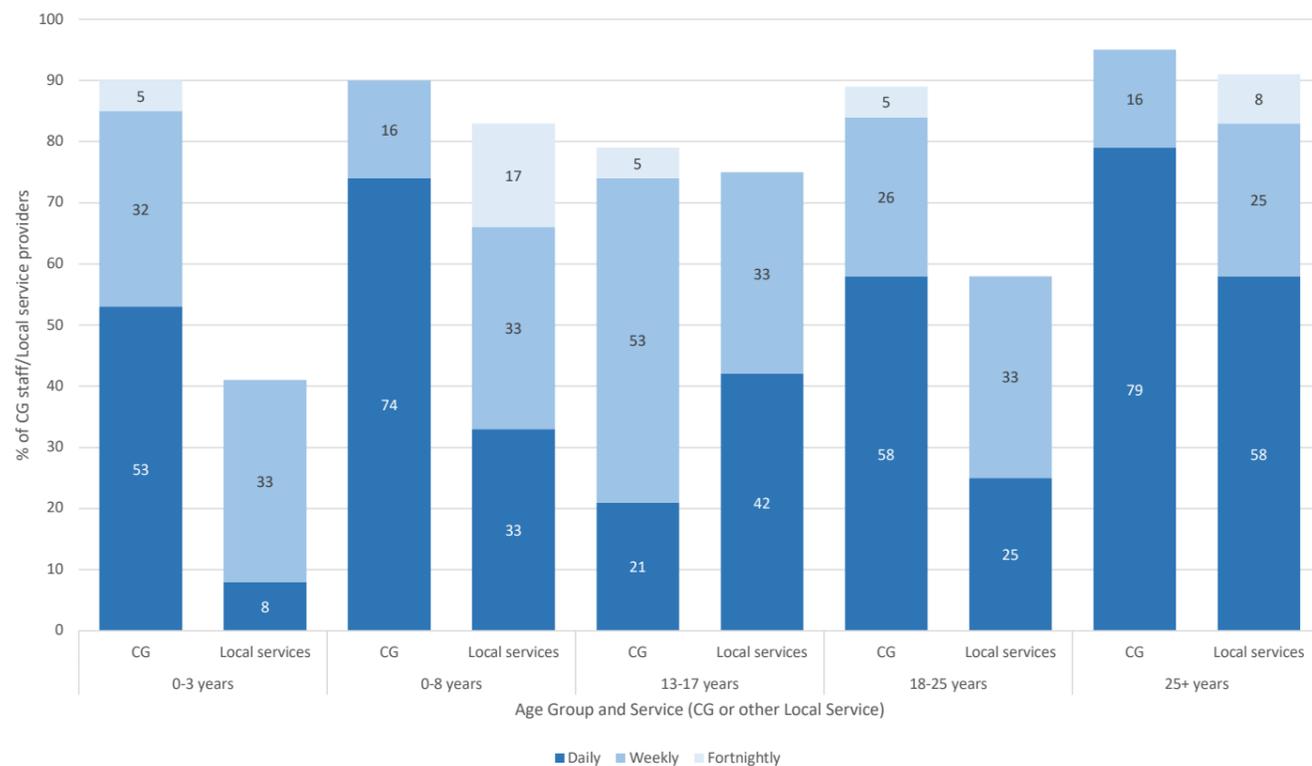
This principle emphasises the importance of reaching children from pre and post birth and their parents (including sexually active adolescents) in relation to learning, wellbeing and child development.

In KWA, Children's Ground implemented Stage One of operations only, which included a focus on working with children aged 0-8 years in formal learning and, with their families, to create intergenerational environments of safety and learning (Cultural and Western, with integrated health, wellbeing, social and economic support).

MCRI found that:

Children's Ground staff were more likely to report that their primary focus was children 0 to 3 years and 0 to 8 years, compared to external services...the survey found that a higher proportion of Children's Ground staff reported daily contact with children compared to external services. More than half of Children's Ground staff reported daily contact with children aged 0 to 3 years (compared to only 8 per cent of external services) and almost three quarters of Children's Ground staff reported daily contact with children 0 to 8 years (compared to only 33 per cent of external services).

Graph 11: Percentage of frequency of engagement with young children - CG staff and local service providers



Graph 11 shows Children's Ground focused engagement on children aged 0-8 years and their families (adults 18+ years). Children's Ground's regular (daily and weekly) contact with children was filling a gap, with other services not connecting as regularly with children, particularly young children (0-3 years).

Children's Ground's engagement and participation data presented throughout Part One of this report is further evidence of the degree to which Children's Ground achieved this principle.

MCRI reported:

A general consensus that positive outcomes for children aged 0-12 is at the heart of all decision making processes, activities and engagements. That is, all decisions relating to things such as teaching curriculums, daily activities, and even employing people from the community were based around if and how it would benefit children in the community. As one staff member described, "In everything we did kids were involved".

They also reported that:

Children's Ground staff identified the act of encouraging families and community to think about (and voice) the outcomes that they wanted for their children from the very start, as something that was fundamental to their work. That is, they promoted and facilitated an environment and a working partnership that was very much focused on positive outcomes for children from the very start.

Children's Ground evaluation interviews with 10 staff supported MCRI's findings in respect to staff putting children at the centre of their work, of supporting families to voice what they want for their children and engage in their children's learning, health and wellbeing - generally 'walking alongside' their children.

Interviews also found that some staff, whose previous experience was not with young children, reported that it was, at times, challenging to conceptualise how to put the child, and especially babies, at the centre of their work. They reported that the support of the integrated team, the organisation's vision, the intergenerational community centre and Bininj employment enabled them to come back to putting young children at the centre.

Prevention and early intervention were also important elements of the principle of starting early. MCRI's survey found that 88% of Children's Ground staff (n=17) reported a focus on early intervention and prevention in all that was delivered.

In Children's Ground interviews, all 10 staff reported that their relationships with families were critical to genuine engagement for health promotion and prevention. They all described their approach to health promotion and prevention as subtle, informal, ongoing, based on



relationships and involving interactions that were both targeted and incidental/opportunistic. They reported that, as their relationship with individuals and families grew, there was greater capacity for early intervention and prevention with increased disclosure of health worries, engagement in health information/education discussions and increased help-seeking behaviour.

MCRI summarised that:

Overall, results from the survey and interviews suggest a strong focus on starting early. This includes a focus on prevention, early intervention, child-centred initiatives and strategies, and a demonstrated effort to actively reach out and engage with children and families of children (including pregnant women).

Children's Ground staff who were interviewed echoed a shared perspective that starting early meant starting even before a child is born. Engaging with families (and expecting families) of children was highlighted as fundamental to starting early and fundamental to the work of Children's Ground. Actively reaching out and ensuring that at the very least an attempt is made to engage every family with a child in the community, was highlighted as a central element of starting early. A strong focus on family engagement is echoed by robust research evidence which supports that a child's family environment and the nature of the care they receive (particularly in the early years) is central to their lifelong health and wellbeing outcomes.

MCRI summary of example shared by a Children's Ground staff member:

A child was born recently to a family that was a priority to child protection services. Children's Ground was able to work with the family for several months before the child was born and co-designed a plan with the family around how to keep the child safe and ensure it would thrive. As a result of this, the child was able to remain with its family after being born, and kept out of the child protection system. The child is now thriving because Children's Ground were able to focus on prevention and starting early. The family feel they have agency and they are strong.

Critical mass

Karri-djarrkurrkimirri kadberre (Work with everyone)

This principle moves away from the traditional approach of case managing targeted families and rather, engages children and families across the entire community to lead whole of community change, from disadvantage to opportunity. This principle is based on the assumption that when a critical mass (75%) of people within the community experience opportunity, safety and wellbeing, the broader community is also likely to experience wellbeing (culturally, economically and socially) over the long-term.

MCRI found that 100% of Children's Ground staff (n=17) agreed or strongly agreed that Children's Ground actively worked to support and know all children and community members.

As presented in Part One, by 2016 Children's Ground engaged a critical mass (75+%) of children in formal and extended hours learning within targeted/intended age groups.

This demonstrates that after three years of operations, Children's Ground had achieved the principle of engaging a critical mass, which was a key foundation for long-term sustained change at a community level.

MCRI reported that:

Overall, Children's Ground staff shared that an inclusive community engagement approach where everyone in the community is actively reached out to, and families are not cherry picked and targeted, based on "level" of vulnerability, was central to Children's Ground approach.

Staff shared that the following factors were essential in being able to do this effectively:

- Build trusting and long term relationships
- Reach out and go to the community, and/or create opportunities for them to come to you
- Set aside dedicated times to hearing the community's views and create a safe space where anyone can come and share ideas, wants, concerns etc.
- Shift the status quo and make engaging and working with everyone the norm
- Always leave the door open. Staff shared that despite some family's reluctance to engage with the service initially, the door was always left open and some chose to engage at a later date
- Allow people to engage on their own terms. Staff shared that some families in the community were transient, but that they engaged with the service when the time and context was right for them.

There was an overall consensus that making the effort to reach out to every First Nations family in the community was part of Children's Ground everyday practice: "there would have been 10-15 per cent of people who weren't involved at all, but we would have connected with them..."

A focus on building relationships with everyone in the community was echoed throughout all interviews: "Meaningful relationships were built with families and individuals and this was the foundation upon which community was continually engaged."

One of the reflections was that building trust is fundamental to community engagement and building relationships based on trust needs to be done over time in a respectful and non-judgemental way that is always being open to people's views and thoughts.

Findings from MCRI's evaluation were also reported by all 10 staff in Children's Ground's evaluation interviews. Engaging and developing trusted relationships with people who have been generationally excluded and disempowered often takes a respectful, equitable and consistent approach over time. Working in environments where there is often change, stress and conflict requires a stable approach which is neutral, fair and accessible to all. This required both consistency and flexibility. The flexibility afforded to Children's Ground staff to develop relationships and respond to each family's needs and priorities was a significant system enabler and critical to initial and ongoing engagement in all elements of the CG Approach.

MCRI reported that:

One staff member shared that Children's Ground was able to invest in relationships particularly well because it was not bound by a limited system and limited parameters (for example as a result of rigid KPIs):

"We have the time to have those relationships, where all the other organisations are bound by the system that limits their interaction with community."

One Aboriginal staff member described how Children's Ground would engage with families and "Walk and talk" in every community "sitting down with them, telling them about Children's Ground and asking them what was important to them". She stated that this built trust with families.

It was noted that Children's Ground would also frequently attend community events which it supported, and often helped organise, in order to meet everyone in the community and build relationships.

One Bininj staff member stated:

"There are lots of organisations here, but they don't get involved with community- but CG always got involved and listened."

These findings were echoed by all 10 staff in evaluation interviews completed by Children's Ground. While not a theme prevalent in all staff interviews, three staff described the challenge of engaging and working with everyone across a range of geographically distant and dispersed communities. It was also noted that the depth of relationships required to develop genuine connections with people meant that, at times, a concerted cross-team approach was needed to plan how they could engage families who had never engaged, or who had engaged, but not for a while.

Child, family + community led

Bininj nkurri-dokmen (Support community to lead the way)

This principle states that Children's Ground will only operate where strongly welcomed and wanted by the community. Families (including children) and communities will be integrally involved in the governance, design and delivery of their programs and services and will lead the day to day operations.

Children's Ground was not implemented in a linear fashion, however, there were key processes deliberately put in place first as the foundational systemic conditions for achieving short and long-term change. This meant strong and effective governance at an organisational and community level was a critical first step in systems reform.

Dual corporate and community governance was implemented. This meant Bininj people made decisions for local strategy and operations. Community governance worked in partnership with the Children's Ground national board, which was responsible for overall organisational strategy and compliance. It was found to be a critical mechanism through which Bininj culture could be embedded across the CG Approach locally and at an organisational level, and showed how local governance could respect and follow cultural governance.

Local governance was implemented in the following ways:

- A Traditional Owner and senior cultural leaders were integral in decision making and were consulted by Bininj families on all significant decisions (whether present at meetings or not).
- Regular community governance meetings were open to anybody from the community. Meetings occurred weekly for the first two years and fortnightly for the last year and a half. Meetings were led by Bininj and largely occurred in first language.
- During and between weekly meetings, Bininj-led processes for decision making occurred including occasionally excluding Balanda staff from a meeting as well as undertaking discussions outside meetings with those not present and who, culturally, needed to be involved in each key decision. This resulted in Bininj leaders returning with a decision made by the community or to report that further discussion was required within and/or outside a community meeting. On many occasions, the right people, culturally, were in the room to make a decision at the time.
- Liaising with Traditional Owners (TOs) and leaders from each local clan/family group occurred throughout operations to varying degrees. There was a complex landscape of relationships between those who were and were not living on their country. Liaising with some Traditional Owners was challenging to navigate due to local organisational structures. Bininj leaders established a policy that no on country trips could occur without the formal approval of Traditional Owners. This was achieved across and beyond Kakadu for all on country learning.



- During initial weekly governance meetings, Bininj staff and families developed policies, services, staffing, expectations, principles, delivery modes and standards. Bininj employment across the integrated service platform was an important enabler for Bininj voices and decision making.
- Deliberate daily interactions with children and families occurred in learning, health, employment and community development, seeking feedback and input into program and service planning. This actively sought the voice of those in meetings or not present. Bininj leaders were able to identify areas of need and solutions and worked with Children's Ground to implement them.

The structure of community governance enabled Bininj families to engage in decision making that was inclusive and adhered to cultural governance practice. This was designed as a systemic enabler to create conditions for empowerment and long-term change. In Children's Ground evaluation interviews, all 10 staff reported that decision making was not rushed or forced by Balanda staff - it was supported to occur at a pace dictated by community that ensured all key people were involved, particularly for important decisions.

In Children's Ground's evaluation interviews, all 10 staff and four of six local services reported observing increased agency related to Bininj decision-making, and the flow-on effect of this on agency in their children's and their own learning, health and wellbeing, as well as agency in their employment and as cultural teachers and leaders.

As stated in Part One of this report, 20 of the 25 family members interviewed reported that Children's Ground listened to what Bininj wanted and 162 adults engaged in governance meetings.



In Children's Ground's evaluation interviews, all staff (n=10) and local services (n=6) reported that it was evident that Children's Ground was Bininj-led and owned. This was supported by MCRI's survey findings (n=10) of: 70% of local service practitioners surveyed agreed that Children's Ground 'places final decision making about services and activity in the hands of community'. 100% of Children's Ground staff (n=17) agreed.

"It seemed like everything was coming from the community. Community based and community owned. They've had a direct communication with the community about what they really truly see as important, and what they would actually see adds value to their life as a community."

Local service, 2017

MCRI reported:

Providing a safe space where people are encouraged to share their views: The importance of this was described and the practice of meeting and sitting with people every single day was highlighted. It was noted that weekly community meetings were held where everyone in the community could come and share what they wanted for the community and their children, or anything else that was on their mind. As one staff member explained:

"We would start every meeting with the principles and then in first language. A lot of the meetings were in first language. We would just wait there until people made decisions. In the first few years Jane and local people chaired the meetings. Every week the community was making decisions. At the community meetings everything from the simplest things to the most complex things are discussed if people want to. People can come just to have a chat; or plan the next 3 months, the

activities they want to do; discussions about something that's happened at a Children's Ground site - how do we deal with that as a community; discussions about funders and funding; the meals at the centre."

The importance of transparency and ensuring everything always goes out to community first before making any decisions was emphasised. Staff shared that transparency is practiced at every level of service delivery and management, including the development of internal policies.

"From the beginning it was about what do people want for their community and what do they want for their children. People know what they want, they know their own solutions, and it's about us hearing them and saying - ok how can we make this happen."

It was also reported that community has developed processes for everything:

"From policies, to how we plan our day, what activities we do with the children, what they want their children to learn, to the school curriculum - it happens every single day."

Aboriginal staff reflected "sometimes we wouldn't be in a good mood and we didn't want to talk (about issues that were happening in family)" and that perhaps this was not understood by Children's Ground staff. It was observed that Children's Ground would always make the time to address issues and speak with all staff members, if there were ever any misunderstandings, and that issues were often resolved swiftly.

Children's Ground's and MCRI's evaluation evidence demonstrates that this principle was implemented effectively and as intended. It demonstrates that community governance was a systemic enabler and created the intended conditions for genuine Bininj decision making and the resulting growing of individual and collective agency and empowerment.



An-karre yi-manmang (Connect everything: learning, health culture, work)

This principle upholds that addressing the social, structural and economic factors that contribute to extreme economic poverty, inequity and intergenerational disadvantage in the communities in which CG works is critical to lasting positive outcomes. It supports a shift from single issue responses to a comprehensive, integrated response by addressing all issues that impact a child's life - education, health, wellbeing, economy, society, law, environment and culture.

The principle of 'Deliver the whole, not the bits' is delivered daily through Children's Ground's Learning, Wellbeing and Development (LWD) integrated services platform. It is what happened on the ground each day in KWA and was the most visible part of the CG Approach. Figure 12 depicts the integrated services platform outlining 'what' services were delivered.

Figure 12: Children's Ground Learning, Wellbeing and Development integrated service platform



This section evaluates the extent to which:

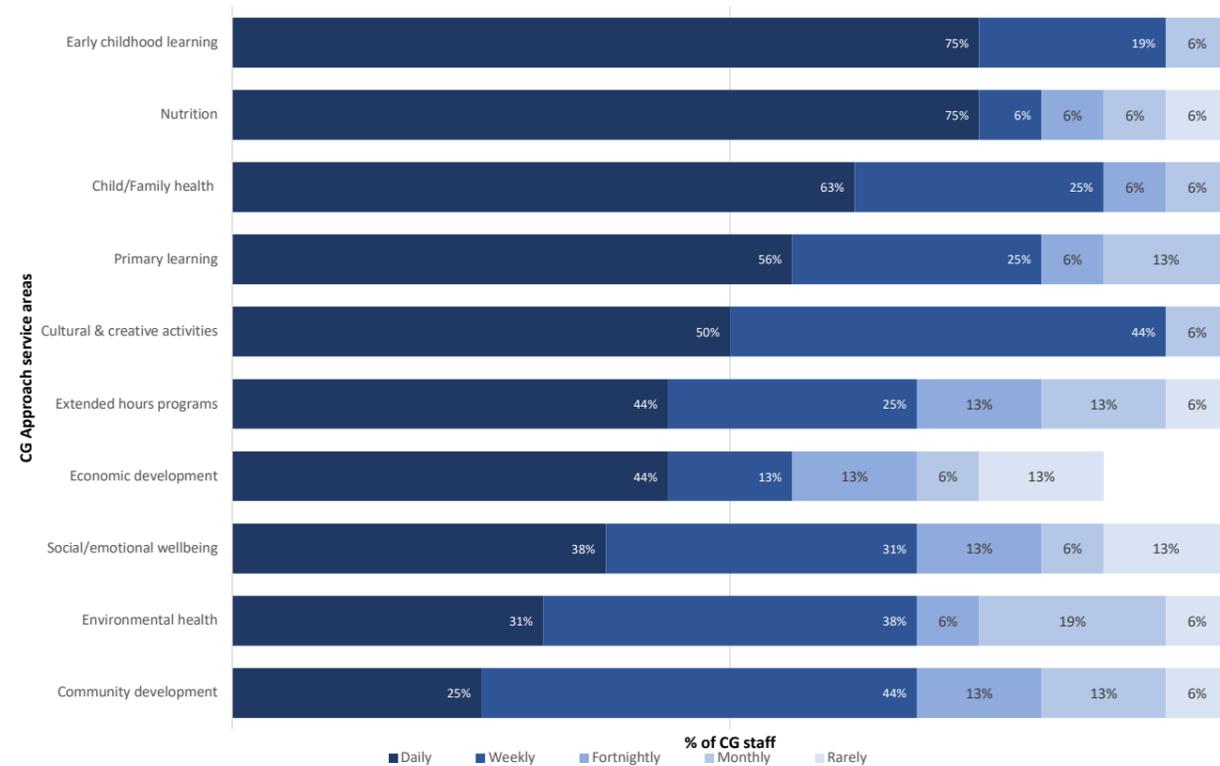
- The LWD platform was implemented as intended and was integrated and effective.
- Effective collaboration occurred between Children's Ground and other local services.

Integration across Children's Ground's LWD platform

Children's Ground's LWD platform is designed as a service system that integrates all key areas of need for children, families and communities. It is designed so that services work together to meet the needs identified by individuals. By including five key service areas in the survey, the intention was to create responsive and integrated service access and delivery.

MCRI's evaluation questionnaire asked Children's Ground Bininj and Balanda staff how often they connected with other service areas across the LWD platform about a child or family (see Graph 12).

Graph 12: Percentage of staff interactions across CG LWD service platform



MCRI reported that:

There were clear indications that Children's Ground was largely successful in integrating its various programs. The overwhelming majority of staff (in various areas of the organisation) reported having daily contact with the early childhood learning, nutrition, child/family health and primary learning teams. Most staff shared at least one contact every week with another area of Children's Ground.

In Children's Ground's evaluation interviews, all 10 Balanda staff reported the ease of working across the service platform, connecting with whichever internal service area they needed to support a child or family.

Nine staff reported the importance of having the flexibility to support children and families in a way, place and at a time that worked for them. Commonalities across staff responses included the flexibility to:

- Take the time needed to develop relationships with children and families.
- Start where people were at with actions related to nutrition, health, learning and teaching.
- Provide intensive individualised support.
- Implement population level interventions easily and quickly as needed that reached all participating children, e.g. anaemia as described previously in child health outcomes.



Staff reported that they didn't 'refer' families to another part of the CG system; they connected them in person, or with family permission, shared the family's circumstances with other relevant staff members who then connected with families.

"As a fully integrated team. If you'd had a child, everybody knew that child, everybody knew that family, people would share resources, would work with one another over what was needed for that child or that family in any given situation."

"The ease of which I can just work with public health, I can work with early years. The ease to which I can just move across all the different services to see stuff being able to happen timely, being able to happen well, being able to happen naturally, as opposed to having all these barriers to connecting with other services."

"A few phone calls and we can make something happen that day."

"If the system doesn't work we're always flexible. Any part of the system can be changed at any time. To be responsive and reflective...Every different [Aboriginal] area has different language groups. There's hundreds across the country. Language reflects the landscape for Aboriginal people...reflects their culture, it reflects their kinship, it reflects their daily activities...Our system does the same...it reflects the community...our model reflects where we are."

Children's Ground Balanda staff, 2017

Two local services reported about Children's Ground:

"Not having to send kids and families off to another service - provided counselling in house - supported with health clinic visits - supported the whole family so strategies to support kids were also supporting adults and their family - other services just send kids from the counsellor back into a home with adults not able to support them and experiencing issues themselves - without support."

"Without Children's Ground, our Bininj families and children wouldn't have a Bininj space to be who they are - that has employment, teaching and learning, arts in it, simultaneously. I've never seen, ever, and in my time in the top end of the Territory, anything even close to it. There's no Aboriginal corporation, there's no other NGO that brings those elements together in an integrated manner."

Local services, 2017

All 10 staff reported that the ability of the service platform to respond to circumstances with Bininj families was an enabler of engagement and contributed to building relationships and trust with families. They reported that the flexibility of their role and the approach meant that delivery was not prescribed, but was instead responsive to the needs and circumstances of children and families.

Nutrition, learning and wellbeing: A day in the life of integrated service delivery...

One staff member described what integration looked like in a typical day:

"The Health team will have a health plan for a kid and are concerned about certain things maybe to do with food or allergies, maybe failure to thrive. They will come to communicate with me [Nutrition] and the early years team, and we'll come up with a nutrition plan to support that child depending on what it is. So if it's like attention issues in class, too much weight gain, we'd look at what causes it and what the kids eat on a daily basis. We'll talk to the parents, have they noticed the concern, what they are feeding the child and from there take on it might be too much sugar, too much salt, too many carbs, not enough protein, not enough fibre, and then talk to the parents about how we balance out the diet. Maybe support the parents for the first couple of weeks with meal preparation, and then supporting the parents by teaching them how to cook. Also trying the kids out with different food at the centre, on what they will actually eat, getting them used to different flavours, different tastes. And then over a few days and weeks we get feedback from the child about how they feel after eating the new foods, how they feel in the afternoon. And today you ate this - how do you feel? Is that better? Getting the child to think as well. The parents start to see a change in the behaviour of their child. If we see a child having particular behavioural issues we bring our Counsellor in who can work directly with the child and family or come into the early years program and run a session for all the children."

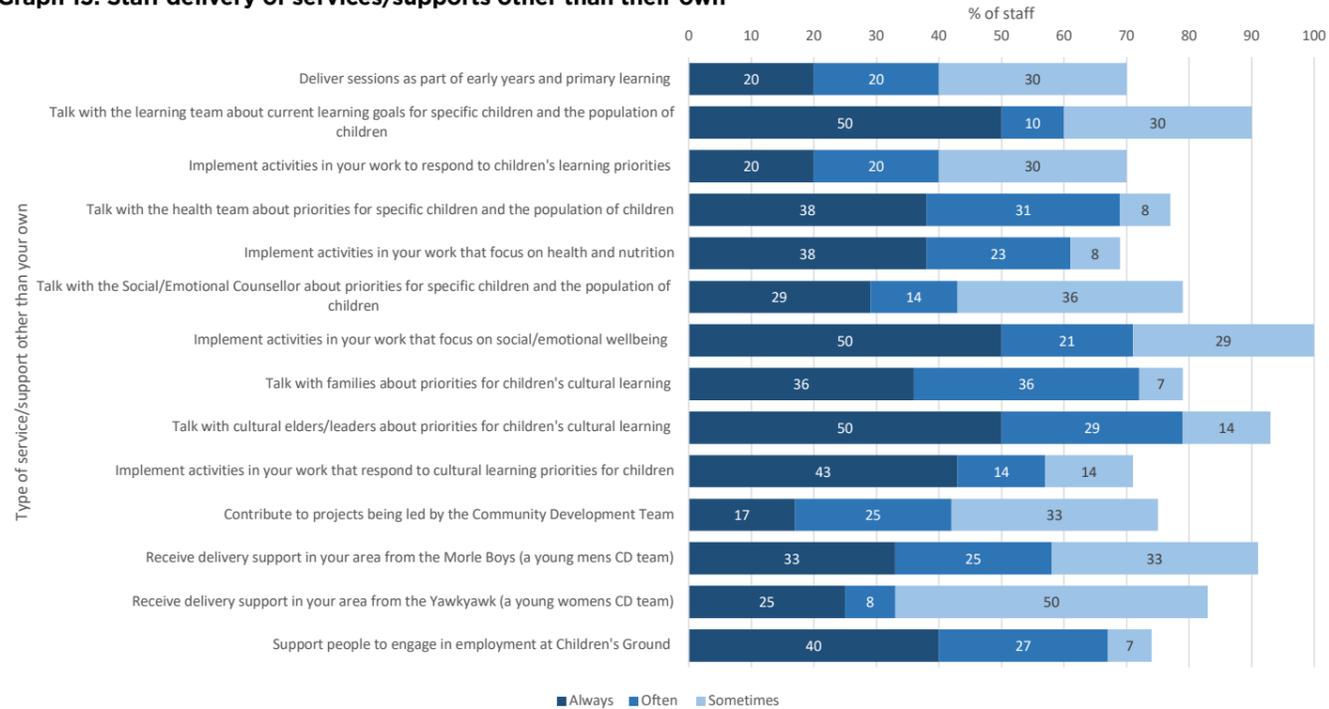
Children's Ground Balanda staff, 2017

Children's Ground's integrated service delivery was designed to reduce systemic barriers and encourage staff to work towards the goals of families. This meant not working within restrictive service silos, but across all service areas of the LWD platform.

Findings from MCRI's evaluation survey found that:

- All (100%) staff (n=17) agreed that Children's Ground supported families in all parts of their life that impact children's learning, health and wellbeing.
- 70% of local service providers agreed (n=10).

Graph 13: Staff delivery of services/supports other than their own



These data demonstrate that there were active and regular connections between staff across the LWD platform, and that this included conversations with families, actively seeking to understand and respond to the multiple learning, wellbeing, cultural and support priorities for children and families.

The MCRI evaluation found that: 92% of staff (n=12) agreed that working closely across Children's Ground service areas increased their ability to reach and engage with children and families and led to earlier identification of child and family needs; 85% (n=13) reported that it helped to better respond to child and family needs.

Collectively, these data demonstrate that, where support from multiple service areas for families was fluid and responsive, genuine integrated service delivery was achieved and effective. Some areas such as community development projects were less integrated across the team.

The internal evaluation found that an enabling strength of integration was the intergenerational community centre, where services were co-located and where all staff spent time each day engaging with children, families and each other. This reportedly contributed to a single team approach that included all staff across all areas.

All (100%) staff (n=15) agreed that, no matter which part of Children's Ground a child/family connected with first, they were supported to access any services they wanted/needed.

To understand the extent to which this occurred, the MCRI survey asked staff to report whether or not they supported people in service areas that were not specifically related to the area they worked in⁵⁴. Graph 13 demonstrates that this occurred with the majority of staff across each service area.

MCRI's report identified that:

It was reported that while some organisations were obliged to operate within the strict boundaries of their specific service, Children's Ground were able to remain more flexible in delivering more holistic support. For example: "if a child is missing school because his mother is sick, the school can't support the mother because that's not part of their role (even if supporting the mother means the child can go back to school). But Children's Ground can support the mother so that the child can go back to school."

"Children's Ground can see children and engage with them not only at an individual level, but at the family and community level. Children are products of their families and communities and that's how Children's Ground operates, by addressing all of those things concurrently and equally."

Internally, staff reported that the vision and culture of shared responsibility towards children and families, coupled with funding that enabled flexibility and responsiveness to children and families, resulted in high levels of integration and the provision of holistic service delivery and support.

Collaboration with local services

Children's Ground's initial focus was to establish the integrated LWD service platform, however, the CG Approach is also designed to work in partnership with local services to promote a seamless system of delivery and support for children across the broader service system over time.

MCRI's evaluation found that Children's Ground was partially successful in achieving external service collaboration. This was supported by Children's Ground evaluation interview data.

MCRI reported that:

Children's Ground staff reported applying a number of approaches to support families to access appropriate (internal and external) services, based on their self-identified need. Children's Ground staff (n=16) reported the most frequent contact with Jabiru Area School with most respondents reporting daily or weekly contact. The most frequently used approaches included being a point of contact for other services, connecting with families at the Children's Ground Centre, outreach, providing emotional support, helping services to connect with families, and providing practical support such as transport. Helping services provide information that helps families feel informed, going with the family to the service and following up with families that they made an appointment were also mentioned.

In contrast to the feedback received from Children's Ground staff where an overwhelming majority reported that Children's Ground supports children and families to access other (external) local services, only four out of the 10 respondents from external services agreed.

These findings are consistent with those from evaluation interviews completed by Children's Ground. Internal evaluation interviews with Balanda staff and local services found that collaboration and communication with external services was not consistent. This was affected by staff relationships between organisations and staff turnover as well as the early stage implementation of Children's Ground.

Implementation of the CG Approach was focused on building from the ground up. Therefore staff started with processes that enabled community engagement, voice, participation and employment. Over the first year of implementation, this included primarily working with community and two key organisations. When the foundational relationships with community leaders and families were established, staff increased their focus on developing relationships with other local services.

This was reflected in four of six local service evaluation interviews undertaken by Children's Ground, in which services reported it took approximately 12 months to learn about what Children's Ground was doing and seeking to achieve. Of these, all reported that their understanding significantly increased after an extensive conversation with Children's Ground. Children's Ground staff noted that positive relationships with key local services were built in the first twelve months, but that staff changes affected the continuity of these relationships.

Five of six local services reported positive working relationships with Children's Ground, however, one expressed significant frustration at a lack of communication and commitment to regular meetings by Children's Ground staff – reporting that their relationship with Children's Ground often felt like "a one-way conversation". They did report frequently observing Children's Ground staff at their service alongside and in support of families. Despite this, they reported that:

"For the staff here to really understand the value of what's actually happened at Children's Ground, it was really difficult without having a regular kind of interaction."

Local service, 2017

Interviews highlighted that the extent and effectiveness of Children's Ground's collaboration with local services was affected by the quality of relationships and communication.

"Open communication helped working together, we worked side by side...Just communication and working together."

"Having a non-government partner who can offer a partnership that isn't competitive, we're not competing for kids and enrolments, that was cooperative...A number of us have got close connections with Children's Ground, and it's helped."

Local services, 2017

MCRI reported that:

A director reflected that within Children's Ground, services were fully integrated. It was also noted that the level of collaboration and service integration with external services varied. For example, the director reported that they had an integrated relationship with the school and were able to track kids easily, however they would have liked to be able to work with early childhood health services in a more integrated way but had not been able to "develop a shared way of thinking and collaborating."

The internal and external (MCRI) evaluations showed that poor communication and shared values can have an impact on service collaboration in a community. This evaluation has demonstrated that Children's Ground had positive and strong working relationships with some services and personnel, but that this was not the case with all services. MCRI data found that:

- 64% of local service providers (n=11) and 56% of Children's Ground staff (n=9) reported that local collaboration led to earlier identification of child and family needs.
- 55% of services (n=11) and 56% of staff (n=9) reported that collaboration increased their ability to engage with children and families.

⁵⁴ For these questions, staff reported on service areas outside their own and did not complete the question that related to their specific area. For example, learning and wellbeing educators did not complete the questions related to learning.

In Children's Ground evaluation interviews with local services, when asked how they have worked with Children's Ground over the three-year period, the most common theme to emerge was the value of Children's Ground's relationships with Bininj families. All six local services referred to Children's Ground increasing their service's capacity to locate, engage with, share information with and support Bininj families.

Examples from services include:

Two local services reported experiencing limitations in operating in a community-led way due to their rigid structures and systems. They reported that Children's Ground was able to provide the flexibility required to engage children and families either in Children's Ground programs or in other local services as needed.

Two local services commented that:

"I think the clients liked to have [CG Health team] there [at appointments] as a second pair of ears to listen and they were able to then continue those conversations later on... Some of the specialist visits that we had here, we would include XX [CG health team member] and he would come along as an advocate for that client."

"Bininj employment from a community development perspective directly affected us in that many family members were employed by Children's Ground so because of our relationship [with Children's Ground] we had one door into family rather than have to build separate relationships with every family in every community."

Local services, 2017

Two local services reported using Children's Ground staff to support their delivery in areas where they felt under resourced and underfunded such as social/emotional wellbeing support, community follow-up health support and transport.

Three local services reported connecting with Children's Ground's Bininj staff to share cultural knowledge and practices with their service.

These were supported by MCRI survey data. MCRI found that:

External services overwhelmingly agreed that Children's Ground's strength was in their ability to celebrate, recognise and utilise local expertise and knowledge, and truly engage with the community. Of the external organisations who did work with Children's Ground, a significant majority expressed that this had allowed them to engage with families more effectively, identify children and families with greater needs more easily' and better respond to children and families.



MCRI also reported that:

Bininj staff who were interviewed noted that Children's Ground was able to support families to engage with other services by providing practical assistance like transportation to and from appointments, and accompany families to appointments as a point of support:

"CG [Children's Ground] would go to the medical clinic with families because families sometimes didn't trust the clinics or were too scared to go. They also sometimes didn't understand the information given (by the doctors or nurses)."

It was explained that Children's Ground would talk to families about the clinics and what to expect, and also provide support and explain what was being communicated by the clinic, in a way that the families would understand.

MCRI's findings were consistent with Children's Ground data from interviews with Bininj families, of which all (100%) reported increased ability to engage with services that they needed for their families as a result of Children's Ground (as seen in section 'Children are healthy and happy'). Qualitative data from these interviews suggested an improvement in the access and engagement of people in the broader system of services within Kakadu.

To conclude this section, both internal and external (MCRI) evaluations found that:

- Internal integration across Children's Ground's LWD service platform was achieved; this created responsiveness, flexibility and an ability to be led by the priorities of children and families.
- Children's Ground created effective collaborations with some external local services, but not with all. The strongest collaboration was with the Jabiru Area School.
- Children's Ground assisted local services in their capacity to locate, engage, share information with and support Bininj families.

In both evaluations, Children's Ground staff and external services reported that the integrated, innovative, flexible approach of Children's Ground allowed a responsive focus on children and families.

Innovation:
combining
old + new

Karri-burrbun bu man-karre bu manekke (Always think about old ways and new ways of doing things)

This principle refers to upholding first culture practices and values, in conjunction with new global leading approaches, in all aspects of life.

The Children's Ground Approach responds to the local context, current global evidence and over 60,000 years of knowledge, recognising that each First Nations community has a unique cultural, land, governance, language and kinship structure.

In practice and strategy, the CG Approach is underpinned by three knowledge and practice systems, which bring together the best of First Nations and Western evidence and approaches.

Three underpinning knowledge systems and evidence-bases

1. Local cultural systems of knowledge (pre-colonisation)
2. Leading practice and pedagogy post-colonisation in relation to culture
3. Global leading practice and pedagogy post-colonisation in relation to learning, health, wellbeing, community and economic development

Across all elements of the CG Approach, from services to governance and employment, Children's Ground staff sought to bring together Bininj cultural knowledge systems and practices with Western evidence of leading practice.

MCRI reported that:

Findings from the survey show that Children's Ground staff prioritised maintaining Bininj Culture: more than three quarters of Children's Ground staff reported that they prioritised Bininj culture by always employing Bininj staff; combining Bininj and western knowledge and approaches.

Over two thirds of Children's Ground staff also reported prioritising Bininj culture by always ensuring access to information in first language...and supporting the community to access traditional ceremonies...

It was important to recruit western staff that demonstrate respect and regard for First Nations culture and knowledge. Formal and informal processes to support cultural understanding and respect were embedded in the Children's Ground model such as mentoring, staff support and program requirements. For example, the early childhood program requires that learning take place on country two times a week and led by First Nation's people. It was reported that the highest engagement from the community was "when we went out on country", which indicates that is what community wanted.

"Aboriginal people have their own culture, language, view of the world, their own understanding of the world, and a horrific history of colonialism. I need to accept where they are and where they want to go. We never try and integrate their culture into the white mainstream culture, but always operating with their culture first and foremost."

Children's Ground emphasise there are realms of knowledge and practice and delivery that sit with First Nations people as experts and realms that are western and realms that are joined. It was acknowledged that in terms of practice, non-aboriginal staff can only work within their realm of western expertise and needed to acknowledge that to allow cultural learning to happen there were times when they needed to stand back.

MCRI also reported that:

100 per cent of all external staff who participated in the survey also expressed that Children's Ground valued culture and community expertise demonstrating CG's commitment to making room for and preserving culture across all their services.

Children's Ground interviews with Bininj families, staff and local services each supported MCRI's findings. All families repeatedly referred to the importance of their language and culture being visible and practiced and that it was particularly important for their children to learn and be surrounded by this.

All 10 Balanda staff described how they supported Bininj access to and engagement with cultural practices and how they worked alongside them with their Western knowledge and experience. One staff member reflected that:

"They [Bininj educators] were really skilled and they would come to me for my skills, so it was a very good balance, a teamwork approach. So, an example is, [she] came to me and said, 'I want to make these cultural bags that I was taught by my mother, and I want you to help the kids write a story about that'. So she did the learning on Country, and we both did the follow-up storytelling and writing with the children."

Children's Ground Balanda staff member, 2017



Assume +
celebrate
ability

Yi-karrmen bininj kun-bolk, kun-malal yi-bebkemen dja kun-dulkarre
(Use and celebrate people's ability and strength)
This principle focuses on celebrating individuals' ability and strength and engaging this strength and ability across Children's Ground operations and individual engagement.

All six local services referred to the way in which Children's Ground respected and privileged Bininj language and culture. It was evident that not all services had a deep understanding of how Children's Ground did this, yet it was reportedly clear that it was an important focus for Children's Ground. Local services reported:

"That's their [Children's Ground's] power, their strength. They are not the Balanda organisation with a few Bininj employees helping the majority of families. Their staff are the Bininj families."

"I feel the groundwork had been done and the best was yet to come. For whatever reason the ceasing of service will leave a huge gap, valuing language and culture as the platform for children and families learning together and being strong, proud and confident in both worlds."
(Early childhood/school education) – MCRI report

Local services, 2017

MCRI summarised that:

Overall, Children's Ground staff who were interviewed expressed that keeping tradition and culture at the heart of all their services was pivotal to their work and their organisation as a whole. They shared various ways in which 'new ways' and 'old ways' were practiced in a harmonious way, but that 'new' ways were never introduced at the expense of traditional practices and culture. This practice of maintaining culture as the foundation of all practices and policies is reflective of real efforts to uphold this principle, which acknowledges culture as fundamental to health and wellbeing for Aboriginal families and as a source of strength and resilience for the community.

Evaluation findings from MCRI and Children's Ground are evidence that this principle was implemented as intended, with consistency in reports across the three key stakeholder groups: families, staff and local services.

Bininj families reported that Children's Ground was able to be flexible and respond to the needs of children and families and that it was the relationships between Bininj and Balanda that made it possible. They reported that Balanda respected local expertise and knowledge as a strength and an important knowledge system to be embedded in learning and across the whole CG Approach (also seen above in principle 'Combine the best of the old and the new').

MCRI's evaluation survey found that 94% of staff (n=17) and 100% of local service providers (n=10) agreed or strongly agreed that Children's Ground values cultural and community expertise. All staff (n=17) reported recognising and celebrating the strength and culture of community. Local services were not asked this question.

MCRI reported that Bininj staff shared:

"In the beginning when Children's Ground started, they (the community) all felt like they were lost and lost everything: knowledge, culture. But they didn't, because CG helped families believe that they can be in control of their traditions. They gave hope to families."

MCRI reported that their interviews with staff following the survey implementation:

...reinforced a shared view that creating opportunities for community members to acknowledge, develop, and celebrate their abilities was central to Children's Ground. This was established by allowing room for flexibility in service delivery, creating employment opportunities, investing in people's areas of interests and not adhering to rigid and traditional service delivery boundaries.

One Bininj staff member described how support was given to everyone, based on need, not on any pre-planned and ridged arrangements:

"Supports were always given based on what families said they needed and how they wanted to work toward reaching their goals."

Implementation of a strengths-based approach that used and celebrated people's knowledge and ability was particularly evident through Children's Ground's approach to employment.

MCRI also reported that:

Staff explained that Children's Ground did this by providing the opportunity for community members to work in different areas such as early childhood, kitchens, nutrition, and administration: "Many people explored many different places and what happened was that people found the best fit for them."

This was supported by Children's Ground's internal evaluation interviews, in which all 10 staff reported that Bininj people were supported to engage in employment in areas of strength and that for some, their roles were part of their existing cultural responsibilities. Staff reported:

- Organisationally, positions within each pay scale were based on levels of skills, knowledge and experience related to Western and Cultural positions.
- Work plans that mapped out their interests and strengths were developed with staff.
- Bininj staff were encouraged to work in different roles to identify their interests and strengths, with staff moving between roles with discussion, support and negotiation of service areas.
- With flexibility in contract types, people decided which contract type (variable, fixed part-time or full time) suited their needs and circumstances, and could move between contract types as needed, with employment at times impacted by cultural responsibilities and other life circumstances.
- When staff did not work for periods of time, their contract remained in place and they could return and re-engage with work at any point.

In Children's Ground's evaluation interviews, a staff member reflected:

"It's the persistence...looking at and finding people's strengths and passions...It requires a lot of flexibility and working with people's strengths when people don't have a history of work, they've never been in the workplace before, they're not really quite sure what their passion is, they're finding their skill base...people tried lots of different jobs until they found what they were interested in."

Balanda staff member, 2017

Overall, evidence from both the internal and external evaluations demonstrate that this principle was implemented effectively. Both the MCRI and Children's Ground evaluations identified the multiple ways that staff worked in a strengths-based manner, including how staff attitudes and practice, coupled with systems reform were enablers, rather than barriers.

Expect+
deliver
the best

Karri-marrkebun (Expect and deliver the best)

This principle sets the standard for excellence that all children and families deserve to enable long-term wellbeing. It aims to provide the best resources and services applicable to each situation and need and to recruit top calibre people. It encourages Children's Ground to communicate and operate in a way that makes it clear that they expect and encourage the best of all people involved (staff, children, families).

Expecting the best and delivering excellence was a wide-spread aim across operations and included:

- Understanding family's aspirations for their children and setting high expectations with families, coupled with a strengths-based approach to achieving excellence with the community.
- Adequate funding to fully resource operations for a critical mass of children.
- Staff professional development and training, peer learning and mentoring.
- Working with Bininj staff and families to develop and adhere to internal policies and practice standards.
- Meeting and exceeding service compliance within national legislation, regulations, safety and quality standards.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the implementation and impact of the CG Approach, including involvement of Bininj families and building towards being Bininj-led.

In Children's Ground evaluation interviews, one staff member reflected that:

"When you expect and deliver the best, people feel it and they can feel your heart and your intentions, and that snowballs, and then you get that response from people as well. It's an important principle, just to keep driving us to not be average."

Balanda staff member, 2017

A core element of expecting and delivering the best also relates to the previous principle of 'new and old ways' and the three knowledge systems that underpin the CG Approach. In KWA, this was considered a minimum standard for excellence at Children's Ground because it brings together the best of First Nations and Western knowledge systems.



Training and professional development

In MCRI's survey and Children's Ground interviews, Bininj and Balanda staff reported they had opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge and that there was a supportive learning culture within the organisation. Balanda staff reported having a focus on not only their own training and standards but also on supporting the talent within the community to encourage excellence.

Bininj and Balanda staff engaged in formal and informal training and development opportunities including: certificate training in early childhood and community services; training in national quality standards for early childhood learning and food safety; compliance training such as white cards, first aid, OH&S; and internal training relating to evaluation and early child development. Staff leadership development and wellbeing training also occurred. On-the-job training included working with external consultants. Both Bininj and Balanda staff were also supported to attend national and international conferences to develop their knowledge of leading practice.

MCRI reported that:

Children's Ground staff shared the view that their community was "filled with people of great ability." As one staff put it:

"Key thing is for people to recognise the skills that they have and for people to exercise those and express them, and in that, they are amazed at their abilities."

Children's Ground staff who were interviewed and completed the survey strongly felt that expecting the best from the families they worked with and the community at large, and investing in their strengths were very much central to their work at Children's Ground. They shared that they worked toward this in a number of ways:

- *They promoted a strength based approach. This meant that engagement was motivated by*
 - a) the recognition that despite existing issues, all families have some resources and strengths that can help them in seeing positive long-term outcomes;*
 - b) working toward a greater sense of agency by the family; and*
 - c) establishing trust and mutual respect between Children's Ground and the family/community.*
- *They recognised the strength in not just families, but the community at large. Children's Ground staff reflected on how they had invested in building the capacity of the entire community by investing in local employment. There was a shared understanding that no one knew the community and its issues better than the community itself. Seeing the community as experts gave way to the view of 'who better to draw upon than local community members'. As such a majority of all Children's Ground*

staff were community members. Staff reflected on how this was the first employment opportunity for many people in the community, and the positive impact that this had on giving people a sense of pride, agency and value. They also reflected on the positive impact that this had on children in the community, who experienced their family and community members going to work for the first time.

- *They provided training and education opportunities. Children's Ground staff shared that people in the community, including staff, were provided training opportunities to build on their skills and develop new skills. Investments were made in people's abilities and their curiosity and willingness to learn new skills.*

Children's Ground promoted the cross training between Bininj and Balanda staff. From the outset and throughout implementation, Children's Ground reinforced to all Balanda staff that, to provide genuinely culturally safe services and environments and the space for Bininj decision making, leadership and ownership, Balanda staff would need to 'unlearn being the expert'. Had Balanda staff assumed the role of experts, they would have created structural and power barriers.

This was an important element of expecting and delivering the best for both Bininj and Balanda because it created an environment of peer-learning – where Bininj and Balanda were learning from each other about their specific realms of knowledge and skills. On-the-job peer mentoring occurred in each role. Balanda staff mentored Bininj staff in Western sector related approaches and work expectations, and Bininj staff mentored Balanda staff in language, cultural knowledge and approaches.



Policy and practice standards

Children's Ground aimed to develop internal standards of best practice and to meet relevant external national compliance and quality practice standards.

As previously reported, Bininj staff and families developed policies, the code of conduct, staffing, expectations, principles, delivery modes and practice standards for all Children's Ground environments during weekly governance meetings from the outset. This included how Children's Ground would meet national regulations and quality practice standards such as in early childhood education (ratios and quality), food safety, etc.

Bininj staff and families were responsible for and supported in actively managing internal behavioural and safety standards that they had established. All staff were responsible for implementing national compliance and quality standards for their respective service/support areas.

Over the three years of operations, high quality practice was promoted and continually developed.

As a new organisation, policy development began and continued to be implemented over the three years of operations. National compliance and quality standards were implemented in the early years learning and health delivery. Cultural compliance policies and other broader policies to support high quality practice were developed as operations progressed. Practice standards were improved and implemented through the course of operations. Policy development and review included deliberate community engagement and leadership in all key operational policies - for cultural standards as well as national standards.

A leadership group of young emerging Bininj leaders and staff were involved in key strategic planning and policy development. They named the policy process "Ewoibok" or 'agreement' and held regular meetings where policies were created, reviewed and considered in relation to both operational and cultural requirements before being presented to the community and management for finalisation.



Monitoring, evaluation and evidence-based practice

From the outset, Children's Ground was established as an approach that was informed, but not limited, by leading practice in national and international evidence-bases.

Monitoring and evaluation was a critical tool in measuring and providing a focus on standards, integrity and excellence, as well as enabling Children's Ground to contribute process and impact evidence to the national and international evidence-base.

From the first year of implementation, comprehensive data training was delivered to all staff. Across the first (2015) and final (2017) evaluation waves, approximately 20 Bininj Community Researchers were trained and involved in monitoring and evaluation. In 2015, the evaluation questions for families were designed with and implemented by Bininj Community Researchers and Balanda research staff. In 2017, the same questionnaire was reviewed, adapted and again implemented by Community Researchers, with support from Balanda research staff.

MCRI's survey found that 100% of staff (n=14) agreed or strongly agreed that Children's Ground's services were guided by best practice where evidence exists. Only 50% of external local service providers (n=10) agreed, with 50% reporting they didn't know. This is consistent with findings reported above in relation to some local services not having a full awareness of the what, why and how of the CG Approach.

MCRI reported that:

In Children's Ground, evaluation is seen as a mandatory process, but community input and decision making is employed. There have been community meetings and staff training to assist with:

- *The development of the Outcomes framework including the process of defining child, family and community.*
- *Workshop the first evaluation survey, which was all undertaken by aboriginal people.*
- *Develop the Database including explaining to the community and workshoping who should have access, what should be confidential and what should be shared. All of that happened with the community.*
- *Children's Ground speaks with community about why data is collected, the information that will be in there (including any names), what will happen with the information etc.*

Staff shared that Children's Ground had provided selected local community members with training relating to data collection and evaluation, how to develop and manage a database, developing an outcomes framework.

Consistent and timely monitoring and evaluation was viewed by key Children's Ground staff as being able to significantly contribute to the organisation's ability to expect and deliver the best. Children's Ground staff viewed the evaluation process as an opportunity to improve systems, provide information back to funders, seek further funding, share their story, and provide feedback to community about Children's Ground achievements and learnings.

Children's Ground staff who completed the online survey reported that monitoring, evaluation and reporting of child, health and wellbeing was an important part of Children's Ground work. Staff noted that this occurred through: conversations with Balanda and Bininj staff, family meetings, individual meetings and support sessions. Documentation included individual learning plans, quarterly reports, statistics, photos and stories.

Staff who completed the online survey were also asked if anything had stopped them from documenting child learning and wellbeing and/or writing individual child learning plans. Time and staff capacity were reported as the main barriers. Some staff reported family preferences for group activities and informal conversations meant that they prioritised these activities. Some staff reported that it was difficult to engage families in learning plans due to previous formats that were not family friendly.

Management reflected that the evaluation process might have informed practice and awareness but probably did not change practice.

From Children's Ground evaluation interviews with Balanda staff, it was clear that staff were informed about the longitudinal evaluation and noted that the local Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator role was critical to ensuring monitoring and evaluation remained visible and on-track.

Staff did report experiencing challenges with data collection and systems. Delivery staff identified challenges in maintaining data collection at different points in time due to the nature of their role and, for some, a lack of clarity about what needed to be collected. Evaluation staff experienced issues with data systems. This included when, after extensive research and recommendations, Children's Ground purchased a data system that was found to be not fit-for-purpose. An internal data integrity audit found that limitations in the design and local use of the system compromised some data with an identified undercount of participation in mobile learning, primary learning and potentially in centre-based learning. The database was abandoned, and staff were required to navigate a new data collection system.

The degree to which staff described using data to inform their planning and practice varied between staff. Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinators employed over the three years in KWA reported that some staff were very engaged in what data they needed to collect and sought summaries to reflect on and use. They also noted that some staff were not as engaged as needed. This was consistent with self-reports from staff.

The evaluation evidence presented here shows that staff understood the importance of data and monitoring and implemented this in practice. Data was used to review and inform standards and practice to 'deliver the best'. This resulted in improved practice by some staff but was inconsistent across all staff. Management reflected that the data-practice feedback loop could have been improved.

Overall there was a shared commitment towards 'expecting and delivering the best.' Children's Ground was continuously improving standards and practice across the three years of operations.



Nkarrben-bukkan wurdurd, dja nkad mak nkarrben-bidyikarrme ba kabirri-djordmen (Stay with them and grow with them until they are big)

This principle moves away from a traditional "quick fix" approach and promotes the support of children from and for 0 to 25 years - ensuring all major transition periods are supported.

MCRI's evaluation surveys found that:

- 100% of staff (n=16) and 60% of local service providers (n=10) agreed or strongly agreed that Children's Ground strategically supports long-term economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the community.
- 100% of staff (n=17) and 70% of local service providers (n=10) agreed or strongly agreed that Children's Ground supports families in all parts of their lives that impact long-term outcomes for their children.

MCRI reported that:

Children's Ground staff expressed a shared view that their intention was never to deliver a certain service or complete a certain program and leave, but rather to engage with children and families in such a way that would result in intergenerational change and long term positive outcomes.

A culture existed within Children's Ground that encouraged community and families to share their long term vision and goals for their children and describe the ways that Children's Ground could support them in achieving these.

Children's Ground staff echoed a belief that supporting long term resourcing and building local capacity was essential to their work and central to seeing long term outcomes. This meant that supporting local employment and education was a strong focus of Children's Ground work...long term gains of the Children's Ground employment model were described by one staff member as beneficial:

"... because it brings economic and food security etc. but it also has a significant benefit in that it has allowed children to see their family members go to work for the very first time. Families are setting an example for their children and paving the way for them. Community are taking agency."

The Children's Ground approach recognises the complex and deeply embedded nature of the challenges that are faced by the Bininj people, and that they are unlikely to be resolved using traditional service driven approaches.

Central to this principle is the view that investing in the long term social and economic influences of the entire community is key to seeing positive long term outcomes for the children in this community. As such, fostering local talent and providing employment and economic opportunities has been central to Children's Ground approach since its commencement.

A great emphasis is placed on the long term goals of the collective community, and all Children's Ground policies, services and objectives are established and delivered with that long term goal in mind. That is, all short term goals are set with the long term goals in mind.

Moreover, engaging with the community and delivering services from the perspective of staying for a generation and focusing on the long term, means service delivery takes on a new approach: one where all areas of life (e.g. physical, social and emotional, economic etc.) are acknowledged and addressed simultaneously and with equal importance.

Despite a strategy and intention to stay for 25 years, Children's Ground ceased operations in Kakadu after three and a half years. Children's Ground was not able to maintain the environment to allow operations to continue. The ceasing of operations showed the vulnerability facing long-term systems change agendas such as Children's Ground.

Children's Ground's community centre was located in Jabiru, under the jurisdiction of the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC), the representative body for the Mirrar Traditional Owners of Jabiru and surrounds. The core funding for the program had been provided by the local Mirrar Traditional Owners via the Kakadu West Arnhem Social Trust, also established by the Mirrar. In 2017, due to changed circumstances and priorities, the Mirrar were no longer in a position to fund and support Children's Ground.

As evidenced in part one, Children's Ground worked with all clans and family groups across the region, one of which included the Mirrar. A key Mirrar family member was part of Children's Ground community governance and was a co-Director of Children's Ground operations in Kakadu from the outset. This, however, was insufficient in creating the authorising environment for long-term operations. Analysis highlighted the financial, political, cultural and social complexity of working within a community where there is a mix of traditional owners and community who are not living on their traditional lands.

An analysis of what is required for the 'enabling environment' to be sustained suggested the following:

- Where possible, limit the risk of single primary investors and achieve greater balance in collective investment between community, philanthropic, government and corporate funding partners.
- A separation between financial investment and operational decision making, ensuring that:
 - the cultural and social licence to operate is established with all community stakeholders and not a singular stakeholder.
 - operational control is not directly affected by the financial investment of funding partners to protect the implementation integrity.

Children's Ground created an investment and governance risk with a single primary funding partner and a lack of separation between financial and operational decision making. This has been an important learning for Children's Ground.



MCRI Summary of findings

Overall, the consistency with which staff involved in the evaluation endorsed and acted on the principles is impressive. There is strong commitment to the Children's Ground vision and a good understanding of how that translated into practice. The only aspect of service where there is any question about Children's Ground not fully embodying a principle in its practices is in collaborating with external services. While it is hard to judge from the evidence how much of a problem this is, it is certainly an issue to be addressed more thoroughly in future Children's Ground sites.

Although Children's Ground had been operating in Kakadu for over three years, it was still consolidating some of its operational practices. This is understandable: the Children's Ground model is unique in its scope, vision and principles, and translating these into an effective service delivery model will necessarily take many years.

This evaluation was a first attempt at measuring the processes involved in the Children's Ground model. Because of these limitations noted [in Appendix one], the results of this evaluation are indicative, but not conclusive. What they indicate is that Children's Ground is engaging with families and communities and delivering services in ways that are largely consistent with the model's underlying principles. It suggests that further work may be needed to refine how some of the principles are operationalised, and to devise ways in which they can be reliably and easily measured. In terms of its scope, principles and vision, Children's Ground continues to offer a compelling model for work with Aboriginal communities. Although the long-term efficacy of the model still needs to be empirically demonstrated, the current evaluation represents a step towards establishing the validity of the way in which Children's Ground engages and works with families and communities.

Children's Ground Summary of findings

Children's Ground and MCRI's evaluations demonstrate that largely, process effectiveness was achieved, albeit not without some challenges in implementation and important learnings for staff and the organisation. The challenges identified were to be anticipated because reform in services, systems and practice was new for staff, families and the broader community, with some reform taking longer than three years to embed.

While staff noted challenges in working in line with some principles, they reported that the organisational vision and structures (systems) and the community aspirations and leadership enabled them to navigate their way back to working in line with the principles. Evidence highlighted a clear line of sight with the principles for staff and the community. Where the CG Approach was not fully implemented as intended, both internal and external factors were influential.

Presented findings show the combined influences that can work together to shift complex disadvantage so that communities can experience opportunity and wellbeing.



System enablers: The conditions for change

Children's Ground's systems reform sought to create the conditions required for sustained change and impact over a generation (25-years). In operations, it was found that each area of systems, service and practice reform complemented and was stimulated by reform in each of the other areas.

The process analysis focused on how staff translated the principles into practice and implemented reform in each systemic area. This section provides a brief overview of the five system enablers for Children's Ground and how each affected the conditions for change.

Governance (dual corporate and local community governance)

Dual governance worked to enable a robust corporate strategy and financial accountability while supporting local governance in day to day decision-making, operational development, evaluation and delivery.

Evaluation data presented throughout this report demonstrates that reform in governance created the conditions for Bininj empowerment. Arguably, the most important enabler of change was privileging the voice and culture of local Bininj people in design and delivery - enabled by community governance processes (and Bininj employment).

Local daily governance of Children's Ground was supported by the Children's Ground national board, which oversaw organisational strategy and compliance. There was a strong relationship between the two tiers of governance. However, Children's Ground ceasing operations also indicates that there was a serious weakness in the ability to navigate both funding and local authorising governance structures to sustain operations.

Children's Ground did, however, empower local people to own Children's Ground and move from being disempowered by systems to environments in which the Bininj voice held the power in daily decision making.

Employment and workforce (local and long-term)

Children's Ground's reform in employment and workforce aimed to enable Bininj employment in the short-term. Full reform in this area is designed to be achieved over the long-term when the generation of children who grow up with Children's Ground become the local service delivery workforce. The overwhelming appetite for employment by Bininj families was an unanticipated outcome.

The high levels of local Bininj employment achieved is evidence that reform in employment acted as a systemic enabler, particularly for: Community governance; Cultural safety; Children learning in their first language; Families walking alongside their children in their learning (Bininj and Balanda); Health and wellbeing; and Social and cultural capital.

Children's Ground employed people who experienced poor health, were living with disabilities, were experiencing trauma and who needed significant periods of time away for cultural ceremonies and sorry business. These are often barriers to engagement, consistency in mainstream employment and ultimately broader economic and social participation.

The combination of systems and supports implemented through daily practice in the community as well as organisational policy (weekly pay cycles and financial management mechanisms) created employment environments and conditions that effectively reduced common barriers to Bininj employment - evidenced by the employment of people who had never been employed or were long-term unemployed or under-employed.

While the extent and overwhelming appetite for employment was unanticipated, Children's Ground hypothesised that child and family engagement would be influenced by the cultural safety of services, supports and environments - and that this could only be genuinely achieved when First Nations people designed, delivered and evaluated services and systems for their community.

An important learning for Children's Ground has been to explicitly articulate the anticipated impact sought from Bininj employment. In Kakadu, Children's Ground did not clearly articulate the intent of wide-spread Bininj employment to enable child, family and community engagement and outcomes. As a result, some stakeholders did not understand the relationship between early childhood learning and local employment, leading some to question the merit in supporting such a large Bininj workforce.

Service delivery (integrated, preventative, responsive to key determinants of health)

The term 'integrated service delivery' is commonly used. However, what often gets lost in the discourse is the difference between integration, collaboration, coordination and co-location.

Evaluation evidence has demonstrated that, internally, Children's Ground achieved genuine integrated service delivery because the authorising environments and conditions for integration were in place; multi-disciplinary service delivery was funded from a single stream with money attached to outcomes, rather than outputs alone. This reduced and overcame barriers commonly faced by services related to siloed funding and operating with strict targets to deliver responses to single issues.

Reform in services enabled soft and supported entry points into learning, family health, employment and community governance, which created the pathways to initial and ongoing engagement. As discussed, reform enabled staff to have the time and flexibility to be responsive and prioritise the development of genuine trusted relationships with families that facilitated service delivery and support that responded to their individual and family circumstances.

Children's Ground's integration went beyond what is commonly provided in integrated child and family services and centres (early learning and health) - also integrating social, cultural and economic development and opportunity. Operating from the perspective of equity rather than equality alone, Children's Ground engaged with each child and family in a way, a place and at a pace that worked for them. This included responding to people's immediate priorities that were often barriers to engagement - and over time working with each family to address more complex concerns. Equitable delivery also included Bininj children and families being afforded the opportunity and right to engage in their first language and to see their culture and values reflected in service delivery and environments - a right afforded to the majority of Australian children and families.

Investment (collective, outcomes-based and at scale)

Operationally, collective investment was found to enable a flexible and strengths-based approach that focused on prevention. It reportedly provided staff and the community the time and flexibility for innovation, community decision making, holistic and responsive service delivery and moving at the pace of and with community.

Collective investment was found to be a core enabler of conditions and authorising environments necessary for genuine and effective implementation of reform in all other systems, service and practice principles within the CG Approach. It was the least visible element of systems reform, yet it arguably significantly influenced the conditions for staff to operate in a way that enabled service and practice change and contributed to achieving the short-term impact evidenced in part one of this report. However, achieving reform in investment that would enable Children's Ground to work and walk with the community for 25-years was not achieved in KWA.

In KWA, Children's Ground's collective investment model included funding from philanthropists, community, government and corporations. From the outset, funding partners invested in Children's Ground working towards long-term outcomes, rather than outputs alone. Collective investment sought to engage funding partners and security for the 25-year Children's Ground journey. Half of the funding was provided by the primary community funding partner, which, when withdrawn, required operations to cease.

Evidence/Evaluation (25-year, First Nations led, outcomes based)

Children's Ground exists to evidence the short, medium and long-term impact of the CG Approach implemented over a 25-year period - with a focus on evidencing the systemic conditions required for implementation effectiveness and improved outcomes over the long term for children, their families and community.

Children's Ground seeks to contribute evidence to the existing national and international evidence-base, recognising that there is a scarcity of research and evaluation being undertaken about the long-term impact of comprehensive and sustained platforms of holistic, integrated and preventative support to address complex disadvantage across Australia - and that there is little to no research and evaluation led by First Nations people and informed by First Nations knowledge systems.

From the outset, Children's Ground had a long-term outcomes evaluation framework that mapped out family aspirations for their children, families and community, coupled with long-term measurements of population level change.

Bininj staff were involved in the design and implementation of the evaluation in both 2015 and 2017; all staff collected and used data to inform their practice to varying degrees.

Monitoring and evaluation impacted how staff approached service delivery. The focus on monitoring embedded a clear focus on outcomes and standards for staff and arguably assisted with maintaining a focus on the quality and organisation's long-term strategic agenda.

While Children's Ground was able to respond quickly to the challenges associated with data systems that were not fit-for-purpose, it meant that changes in data management had an impact on evaluation development and momentum.

Some key mechanisms through which Children's Ground could achieve reform in evidence and evaluation were in place. However, there were areas in which monitoring did not evolve meaning that some activities were not captured in the data sets. Notwithstanding the challenges identified, Children's Ground did implement a longitudinal evaluation with Bininj staff and families, achieved ethics approval and undertook robust analysis of all key indicators within the evaluation framework.

Children's Ground has learned about the risks and enablers in embedding a culture of monitoring and evaluation within operations. For some staff and community members, this is a journey that can take a number of years. Supporting this with qualified and experienced data and evaluation team members embedded in the organisation is critical.

Summary of system enablers

Evaluation data has evidenced that Children's Ground achieved reform in each key systemic area. Some system reform areas exceeded expectation (workforce and integration), whereas others were not fully achieved to the extent intended (evaluation, investment stability). Dual governance was a successful area of reform and provided significant strength, but was not able to withstand significant challenges to deliver the long-term operational environment. However, systemic reform reportedly created the conditions for effective implementation and contributed to the changes and short-term impact evidenced for children, families and the community.

It was demonstrated that creating systemic conditions that are enablers, rather than barriers to engaging First Nations communities and that implementing these in the right way is critical in achieving change and achieving short-term impact.

While reform in each systemic area was found to be important, this evaluation evidenced that reform in one system area alone would not have enabled the process effectiveness identified nor the demonstrated short-term impact for children, families and the community. It was found that the depth and breadth of the interconnectedness between systems, service and practice reform was a significant enabler because they are inextricably linked in relation to how they influence and enable practice and delivery to create change and impact for children and their families.

Cost Analysis: Efficiency and effectiveness



The Children's Ground Approach aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the current systems of education, health, economic and social services - in respect to both delivery and cost.

Children's Ground aims to achieve economies of scale through effective implementation of a holistic and integrated platform of prevention, early intervention, employment and empowerment - seeking implementation that is cost effective and efficient in the present and cost saving in the future.

This cost analysis takes into account that from 2014 to 2016 implementation of the Children's Ground Approach grew to become established as full operations by 2016. Therefore, the cost of implementation increased each year, with the per-person cost from 2016 expected to remain stable for the remainder of stage one operations.

This analysis also considers the cost of delivery for both the local and broader population of visiting children and families - people who visit frequently or infrequently and stay for a short or long period of time. While not permanent residents, they were engaged in many elements of Children's Ground when staying in Kakadu.

Per-person cost of delivery

In total, excluding infrequent visitors, the cost of Children's Ground was **\$9,825 per person in 2014** increasing to **\$13,114 in 2016**. When taking into account all participants of Children's Ground (including visitors), the cost was \$8,965 in 2014 and \$10,427 in 2016 (see Table 12).

Early years learning and education are key determinants of lifelong wellbeing. An analysis of the costs for the delivery of Children's Ground's Learning and Wellbeing platform (55% of total budget), found the average per-child cost (for children aged 0-11 years, excluding infrequent visitors) over the three years was \$21,290. In 2016 the cost was \$23,440. When taking into account all participants (including visitors) of learning and wellbeing, the average per-person cost over the three years was \$16,099 and \$16,449 in 2016.

Table 12: Per-person costs of delivering the CG Approach in KWA

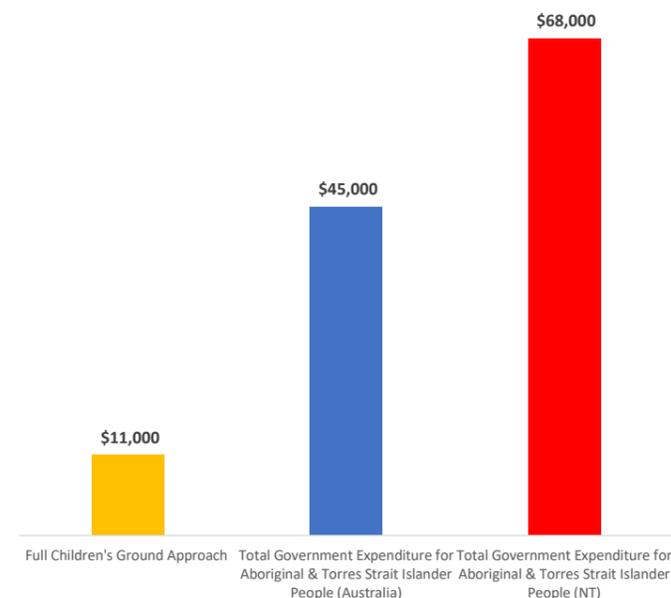
Total KWA Costs	2014	2015	2016
Per-person cost of full CG Approach			
Cost per person for permanent residents and frequent visitors	\$9,825	\$12,030	\$13,114
Cost per person all participants (including visitors)	\$8,965	\$10,357	\$10,427
Per-person cost of Learning and Wellbeing for children 0-11 years			
Cost per person for permanent residents and frequent visitors	\$19,951	\$20,480	\$23,440
Cost per person all participants (including visitors)	\$16,210	\$15,639	\$16,449

Cost of delivery in context

Comparisons between the Children's Ground Approach and other whole of community systems interventions and expenditure are complex. However, the cost analysis found that in proportion to Government expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Children's Ground Approach is a minor investment with the potential to deliver considerable improvements in equitable access, engagement and outcomes for the children and families with whom the current system struggles to engage.

In KWA, the full Children's Ground Approach costs approximately \$11,000 per person to deliver each year. To put this in context (see Figure 13), total direct government expenditure on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the Northern Territory in 2015-16 was approximately \$68,000 per person⁵⁵ and across Australia was \$45,000⁵⁶.

Figure 13: Comparative annual expenditure per person - the CG Approach with the Northern Territory and Australian Governments



Many of the areas of government investment - early childhood development, education, healthy lives, economic participation, and safe and supportive communities - align directly with Children's Ground's integrated service platforms. This is not intended to present Children's Ground as a substitute for all of these services, but rather to put the cost of Children's Ground in perspective and balance its cost relative to impact - evidenced by engagement and outcome evidence presented throughout this report.

Economies of scale

When considering the full cost, Children's Ground was able to create economies of scale, achieving cost efficiency through the integration of placed-based, holistic, intergenerational services of early years, targeted primary aged learning, after hours learning, family wellbeing, employment, local governance, health, culture and community safety.

The cost benefit relates not only to the relative cost of service delivery but also to the potential future cost savings through prevention of harm. Recent economic modelling found Aboriginal health inequality to be a substantial economic cost to the Northern Territory - an estimated \$16.7 billion between 2009 and 2013 (43% from lost life-years; 35% from lost productivity; 22% from higher direct health costs). This is equivalent to 19% of the Northern Territory gross state product.⁵⁷

The communities that lead Children's Ground would be at the upper end of government expenditure and costs per person due to ill-health (physical and emotional), incarceration, poor housing, welfare, child protection services and lower educational engagement and completion. These communities do not fare well within the current service system due to complex and overlapping disadvantage, cultural barriers and intergenerational trauma. Children's Ground was designed with these communities to respond to their context, to reduce their barriers to education, health and wellbeing and economic engagement, and to build empowerment and agency.

The cost analysis indicates that Children's Ground can provide a prevention-focused service offering for children, their families and the broader community that is economically efficient and potentially cost-saving. Children's Ground presents a system that has the potential to deliver significant long term fiscal gains and can be delivered with financial economies as a result of service integration. Children's Ground presents a viable strategy to achieve real change for children and families who currently face extreme and complex inequity, disadvantage and disempowerment.



⁵⁵ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2017. Indigenous Expenditure Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-december-2017/indigenousexpenditure-report-2017>
⁵⁶ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision. 2017. Indigenous Expenditure Report, Productivity Commission, Canberra. <https://www.pc.gov.au/news-media/pc-news/pc-news-december-2017/indigenousexpenditure-report-2017>
⁵⁷ Zhao, Y., Vemuri, S.R. and Arya, D., 2016. The economic benefits of eliminating Indigenous health inequality in the Northern Territory. The Medical Journal of Australia, 205(6), pp.266-269.

Contribution Analysis: How did the CG Approach contribute to changes?

Contribution of the CG Approach:

"The concept of Children's Ground and the ideology behind it is basically how we should all be working." (Local service)

"Enabled Bininj to shape the model, and not the model to shape Bininj." (CG staff)

"They do it well [listen to Bininj]. We would tell them, where we would go [Learning on Country], Bininj organise what we need...they don't have to." (Family)

"I think a sense of pride, a sense of ownership motivated them to be a part of something that was really good, and that was for them. I think it empowered Bininj to speak their own language and to be employed to teach their kids in language." (Local service)

"Parents could trust what happens down there [at Children's Ground] because everyone's there as teachers, in the kitchen and all around." (Local service)

"Because being home all day smoking. I think to myself I should start work. And when I started to work I made new friends, meeting new people. Closer to family." (Family)

"I think by having your family close to where you learn and your family being productively employed, and so more satisfied and happy knowing that they've got agency to support them. It shows their kids that life-work satisfaction that is linked to your employment." (Local service)

This evaluation has evidenced changes for children and families across the Kakadu community during the period of Children's Ground operations. Attribution of change from a whole of community approach is difficult to determine, particularly within a community setting that is influenced by a range of circumstances. However, the findings reported suggest that Children's Ground had a direct short-term impact on the lives, learning and wellbeing of Bininj children and families in KWA during the three-year period of operations.

Families, local services and staff attributed many of the changes during the period of operations directly to the CG Approach, including: Early childhood engagement; Children as engaged and successful learners in both Bininj and Balanda learning; Engagement of families in their children's learning; Cultural wellbeing for children and families; Local Bininj governance; Employment of Bininj people in the region; Increased supported access to local clinical health services and understanding health information; Child and family health and wellbeing; and Safety.

Attribution of some changes was clear, such as the engagement of a critical mass of children and their families in early learning. The extent of attribution of other changes was difficult to measure, particularly changes in child and family health, wellbeing and safety. Whilst these were largely attributed to Children's Ground by families, staff and some local services, the scale and reach of these changes across a critical mass cannot be fully determined.

In relation to impact, each stakeholder group interviewed identified the CG Approach as the primary contributor to changes observed for children, families and the KWA community over the three years of implementation. References were made to collaborations between Children's Ground and local services such as the Jabiru Area School as contributing factors in some circumstances, particularly in learning and wellbeing.

Families, staff and services interviewed, each identified elements of the CG Approach as influential contributions to change. Table 13 presents the respective stakeholder groups where each person interviewed identified each element listed. These collectively related to systems, service and practice reform.

A clear finding from this evaluation was that Children's Ground contributed to change through key enablers within the CG Approach.

Bininj empowerment and leadership was attributed by all three groups.

Privileging culture and Bininj empowerment are key elements that families attributed to how Children's Ground enabled change and the impact observed in KWA. Families were the only stakeholder group to identify privileging culture as one of the most significant contributions to change. Staff also reported this, however, it was not amongst the strongest themes to emerge from their responses.

The key drivers of change identified by local services echoed the ways in which these same services reported not being able to work due to more rigid systems and service targets and valuing the ways that Children's Ground worked. For example, service access through transport, having trusted relationships with families and working in a flexible and responsive way. This was consistent across all evaluation interviews with services where there was a positive working relationship between Children's Ground and the service (five of six local services).

Children's Ground's practice principles were particularly evident across the elements identified by each stakeholder group as influential contributions to change and impact in KWA. Particularly, 'Child, family and community led', 'Deliver the whole, not the bits', 'Combine the best of the old and the new' and 'Assume and celebrate ability (Strengths-based)'.



The principle of working in a strengths-based way was reflected in responses by families, services and staff. Operating from a strength, rather than problem/deficit model appeared to be a significant enabler for change. For example:

- Bininj employment was based on strengths and interests.
- Being community-led assumed ability of Bininj families to have the answers and solutions and the ability to strategise and implement.
- Embedding Bininj culture and language across the CG Approach ensured that staff and families could engage with their strengths and be the experts.
- All services and supports were delivered through an empowerment model that built on the agency and strength of children and families.
- Development of relationships started with people's strengths rather than their deficits.

People didn't come to Children's Ground because they had a problem – they reportedly came because it was focused on their culture, their strengths and their aspirations for their children. Whilst participating, people did engage with services and supports that responded to worries, concerns and problems they were experiencing, but it was not a deficit model where their problem defined their family's engagement. Children's Ground's engagement of children and families was reportedly a key contributing factor to building on social, cultural and economic capital across KWA during Children's Ground operations.

Evaluation data presented, supports and has evidenced that elements of the CG Approach were enablers of change for children, families and community.

Summary of contribution to change

Children's Ground operations can be linked to improved education, cultural, social and economic wellbeing for the local Bininj community who engaged with Children's Ground, reaching across the region during the three years of operations.

This evaluation demonstrates that the impact of Children's Ground was due to the Children's Ground Approach and was achieved by the interconnectedness of 'what' Children's Ground delivered, 'how' it was delivered and systemic enablers of the CG Approach.

Empowerment, strengths-based practice and respect of local Bininj people through governance, employment and privileging of culture were arguably the most important and significant drivers of change, along with the dedicated focus on children.

Table 13: CG contribution to change – as reported by families, staff and local services

Bininj families (n=25)	Local services (n=6)	Staff (n=10)
Bininj culture and knowledge respected, valued and enacted	Relationships between Bininj families and CG staff	Bininj ownership of Children's Ground – Bininj decision making and voice
Families together - involved and supporting children's learning and health	Community-led – Bininj culture and leadership	Relationships and trust between Bininj families and CG staff
Bininj employment	Bininj employment	Bininj employment
Bininj decision making and leadership	Access to services through transport	Agency of children and families
Child and family agency - Bininj doing it themselves and for each other	Children's Ground flexibility and responsiveness to community	Seamless integrated service delivery within Children's Ground

Conclusion

In Kakadu, Children's Ground set out to create the conditions for a different life experience for the current and future generations of children. Over three and a half years, Children's Ground created a new reality for a critical mass of children in Kakadu West Arnhem.

The outcomes analysis indicates that over three years in KWA, children's experiences of life looked different: a majority of children were engaged in early learning; children disengaged from primary school were actively engaged with Children's Ground's primary learning; children saw their family employed, many working for the first time; children and families saw their language and culture privileged and enacted; children saw their families and cultural and community leaders using their voice and being heard; and most importantly, the Bininj community felt respected and empowered within the service and systems designed to support them - because they were the designers, deliverers and evaluators.

The Children's Ground Approach, as evidenced over three years in Kakadu, has the ability to: Reform systems; Be responsive and effective; Empower people; Provide services that engage historically excluded and disengaged children and families; and Change the status quo.

At a time where suicide rates, incarceration rates and child protection rates for First Nations children, young people and families are at epidemic levels, Children's Ground could be a critical circuit breaker. Children's Ground lays the foundations for prevention - to provide children with the opportunities to create a different life trajectory - one that leads to educational success, cultural identity, health and wellbeing and future employment.

Despite billions of dollars and decades of public policy efforts, many First Nations children continue to be born into families and communities experiencing poverty and social disadvantage, often stemming from intergenerational trauma, a lack of agency, choice and voice, systemic racism and social and economic exclusion - all negatively impacting their health and wellbeing - and all of which are preventable for future generations. Nationally, major inquiries and reviews over several decades have presented and re-presented the statistics, the human realities, and the reasons, both historical and current, for the profound inequity of First Nations people in Australia. From these, a consistent set of recommendations continues to emerge, recognising that the status quo is failing First Nations children and families. Recommendations call for the fundamental need to grant agency to First Nations people, including through leadership in the design and delivery of services. They call for more holistic approaches that draw on the strengths of First Nations people and culture, using prevention, early intervention and empowerment, rather than relying on crisis response.

Children's Ground was designed by First Nations people and responds directly to these recommendations. These recommendations are embedded within its principles, services and systems reform. Three years of implementation evidenced dramatic short-term change and impact for children, families and the community - change that was in contrast to minimal changes observed within NT remote and very remote communities, particularly in child and family engagement in learning and health, Bininj employment and perceptions of safety.

Through an integrated, preventative approach that empowered people and responded to the social, cultural and economic determinants to lifelong wellbeing, the CG Approach was able to achieve the foundations for long-term change across key indicators for Bininj children, families and communities. After only three years of a 25-year approach, short-term changes cannot predict long-term change and impact. The outcomes, however, suggest that the Children's Ground Approach has the potential to create long-term change if operations can be sustained.

This evaluation found that both What (integrated service platform) and How the CG Approach was implemented (key practice principles) significantly influenced and contributed to achieving short-term change. In turn, it was found that key systems enablers created the conditions for effective implementation of the CG Approach.

The evaluation also demonstrated that reform in one area of the system alone would not have created change or whole-of-system reform. Individually, reform in each area was found to be important, but each area was inextricably linked to and influenced by the others. It was this interconnectedness that created the conditions for change for children, families and the community.

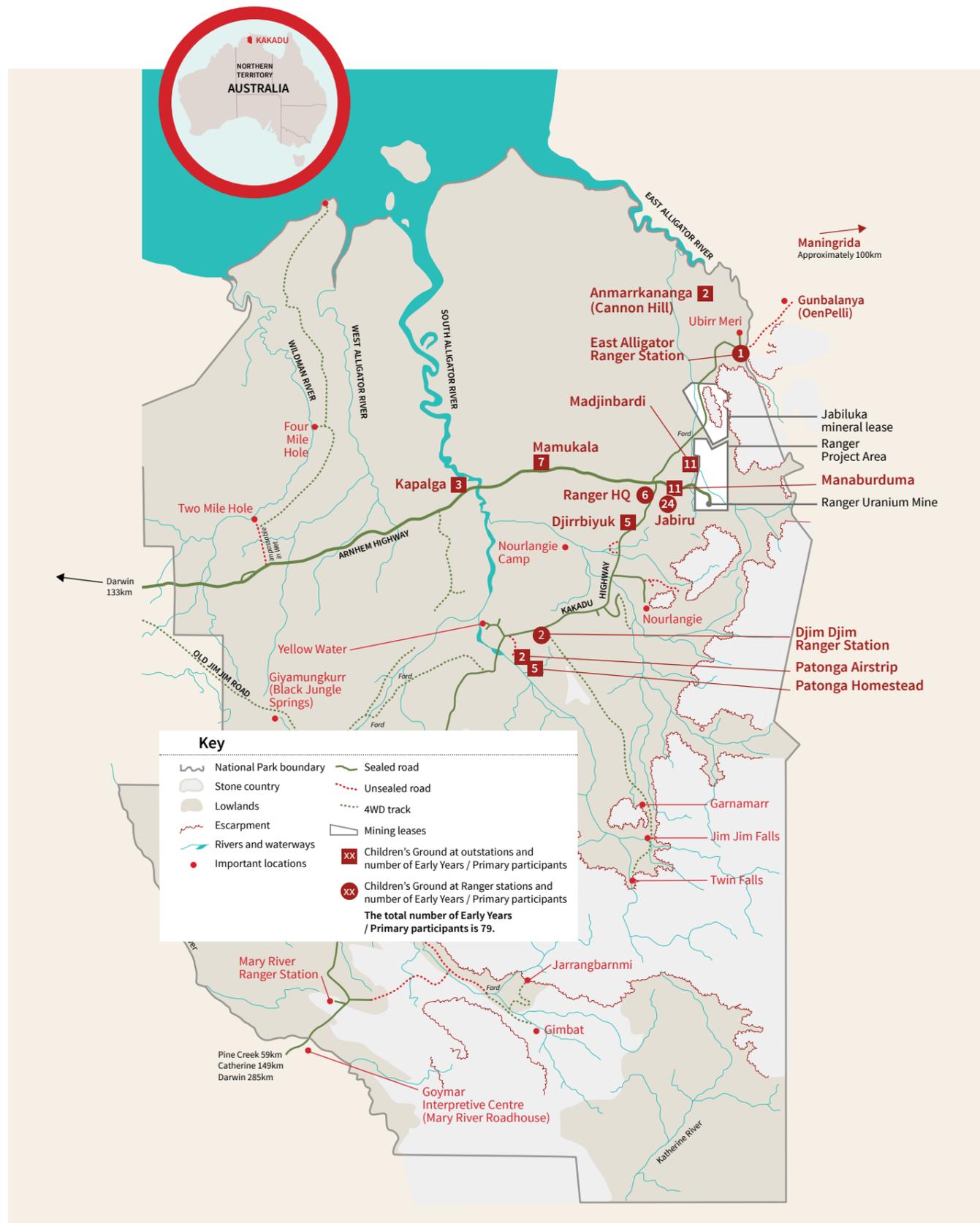
Delivery of the CG Approach in KWA was economically effective and efficient. Children's Ground works with communities with the greatest burden of need and who are less likely to be actively engaged in education, health, social and economic services and supports. The cost-effectiveness of the CG Approach was evidenced by the short-term impact and change achieved for children, families and the community, at a significantly lower per person cost than other well-known early childhood interventions and government expenditure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Cost-efficiency was achieved through high quality and effective delivery of a place-based, integrated and prevention focused platform of services that were community-led.

There were both expected and unexpected outcomes and learnings from the first implementation of the CG Approach. The change and systems analysis highlighted key challenges and learnings for sustainable change over the long-term. It highlighted the layers of influence impacting outcomes for children, families and communities at the individual, family, community and service system level, and where Children's Ground showed both strengths and areas for improvement.

Extensive evaluation of the CG Approach has shown the ability to create short-term change for children and families who live with extreme and complex intergenerational inequity and disadvantage. Children's Ground delivers against key principles of human rights and dignity, it is cost efficient and it has the potential to achieve real long-term change.



Appendix one: Kakadu West Arnhem region map



Appendix two: Data definitions, challenges and limitations

Children's Ground data definitions and challenges

Children's Ground experienced challenges and limitations common to many holistic, place-based, whole of community initiatives - primarily the complex nature of capturing the drivers of change that underpin the CG Approach and are not easily measured through quantitative or qualitative means. Some of these included the impact of empowerment through local governance and voice and rebuilding the social capital and wellbeing of communities, which for many First Nations communities have been seriously damaged due to colonisation. To overcome this challenge, Children's Ground has ensured that the voice of Bininj families and community is evident throughout the evaluation report - so change and impact are verified by the verbatim perceptions and experiences of Bininj people.

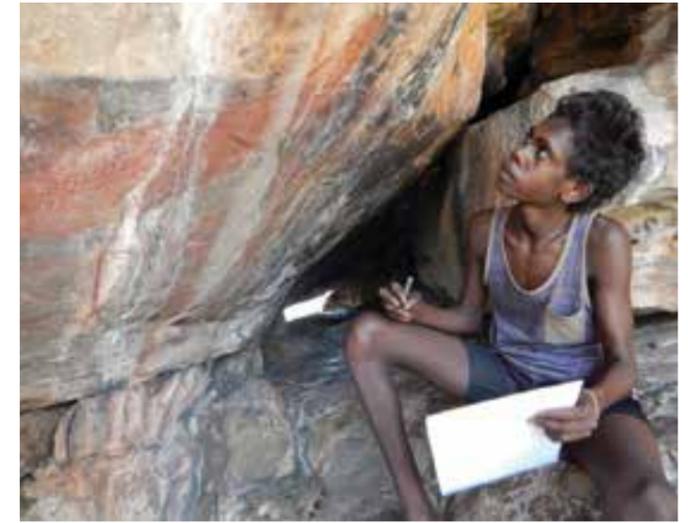
Furthermore, data analysis within small and mobile populations posed a significant challenge; it required sophisticated data parameters that enabled data collection that could genuinely evidence the capacity of Children's Ground to engage children and families and demonstrate change. To genuinely understand the reach of the CG Approach, family mobility was tracked by assigning a 'residency status' of Permanent, Frequent Visitor or Infrequent Visitor.

- Permanent residents were defined as living in Kakadu.
- Frequent visitors were defined as having an active relationship with families and country in KWA with regular and/or extended time spent in community.
- Infrequent visitor status identified families with single or short, infrequent visits to KWA.

This was assessed by local Bininj staff through their knowledge of families and visitors. Data presented in this report represents permanent residents and frequent visitors, unless stated otherwise.

Another challenge included the database system. Despite being recognised as a field leader, the chosen database was not fit-for-purpose. It lacked the responsiveness and flexibility required for Children's Ground's extensive data collection, and a data integrity audit in late 2015 identified an undercount of participation in mobile early learning and primary learning when compared to staff records. The system was replaced at end of 2015.

The responsive nature of the Children's Ground Approach meant activities were regularly being developed and refined to address community priorities and realities. As a result, data for some activities outside of core implementation activities was not captured. This was due in part to the speed of operational development, the lack of database flexibility, and the process of building the skills in data collection for program staff to capture a complex array of activities. Therefore, this report, reported on some but not all Children's Ground activities.



MCRI evaluation limitations

In interpreting the results of this evaluation, a number of limitations should be noted.

Although plans for a full process evaluation of the program had already been drawn up, these has to be modified considerably in the light of the limited time left and the reduced funding available.

This affected the size and representativeness of the sample of staff and external providers involved in the survey and interviews. Because the final sample size was so small, the results cannot be interpreted as necessarily reflecting the opinions and experiences of the entire Children's Ground staff.

The combination of limited time and funds also meant that the evaluation team were unable to visit Children's Ground, as planned in the original proposal. Therefore, the evaluators were also operating with partial knowledge of the programs and services that Children's Ground provides, of the staff providing them and of the conditions under which the services were delivered. There was not time to trial the survey form or build a relationship with the indigenous staff being interviewed. This meant that the evaluation was not conducted in ways that reflected Children's Ground's own principles -eg. Working in partnership with others - nor were the evaluators able to ensure that they were properly respectful of culture.

Perhaps the biggest limitation of the evaluation has already been noted: that the service recipients (i.e. families and community members) did not partake in either the survey or interviews. Thus, the results cannot be interpreted as reflecting the experiences of service recipients.

Finally, it should be noted that this evaluation was a snapshot of Children's Ground at a particular point in time, rather than a review of its operations over its time in Kakadu. Therefore, the evaluation cannot tell us how consistently Children's Ground has been able to sustain fidelity to its principles, or whether there has been any significant variability. Again, this highlights the need to establish continuous monitoring processes to ensure a consistent level of good practice.

Appendix three: Research Advisory Group endorsement

October 2019

William Tilmouth
Chair Children's Ground
Chair Research Advisory Group
Children's Ground

Dear William

Re: Final evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach in Kakadu West Arnhem, 2013-2017

Since 2015, our group of researchers from across Australia have been supporting the evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach in Kakadu West Arnhem and Central Australia.

Children's Ground is a groundbreaking journey with the potential for transformational and generational change for families and communities experiencing the greatest disadvantage. Longitudinal evaluation of the process and impact of the Children's Ground Approach is critical to build the evidence base for systems change nationally. Implementing such a dynamic approach in complex environments can be challenging, as is evaluating such work. Children's Ground's goals for children and families are long term, and clearly so is your evaluation strategy and approach.

For this final evaluation of Children's Ground's operations in Kakadu West Arnhem, we have provided advice, guidance and endorsement of data collection and analysis throughout the process. We are confident in the rigour, process and analysis that the Children's Ground evaluation team undertook of internal quantitative and qualitative data, and external administrative data where available. The report was reviewed by our Research Advisory Group on multiple occasions to interrogate the data, analysis and evaluative judgements.

This is a very comprehensive and thoughtful evaluation that communicates the rationale and process of the Children's Ground Approach and the journey traveled with the families.

We commend the Children's Ground team on this final evaluation report, noting that you experienced some challenges often associated with 'real-world' evaluations of new and evolving approaches. The report acknowledged these challenges rather than glossed over them - which has provided valuable insights and learnings and will enable refinement of methods for the ongoing evaluation.

This evaluation has demonstrated that after three years of the Children's Ground journey, strong foundations for long-term change were achieved - put in place by First Nations people and supported by Children's Ground. Your short experience in Kakadu West Arnhem shows that the Children's Ground Approach has been effective in creating change across a whole community in a short period. The integrated nature of this change for children and families is of particular importance and includes early childhood, schooling engagement, local governance, employment, wellbeing, safety and cultural identity. This approach has potential for significant long-term impact.

Our next step is to use this report to inform relevant policy and practice changes beyond Children's Ground. The report makes a compelling case for the continuation and broader implementation of this important work.

Kind regards,

Children's Ground Research Advisory Group

Professor Komla Tsey: Research Professor, Centre for Research and Innovation in Sustainability Education, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University

Associate Professor David Thomas: Head, Wellbeing and Preventable Chronic Disease, Menzies School of Health Research

Associate Professor Sally Brinkman: Co-Director, Fraser Mustard Centre. Senior Research Fellow, Telethon Kids Institute

Mr Matthew James: Senior Executive, Housing and Specialised Services Group and Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

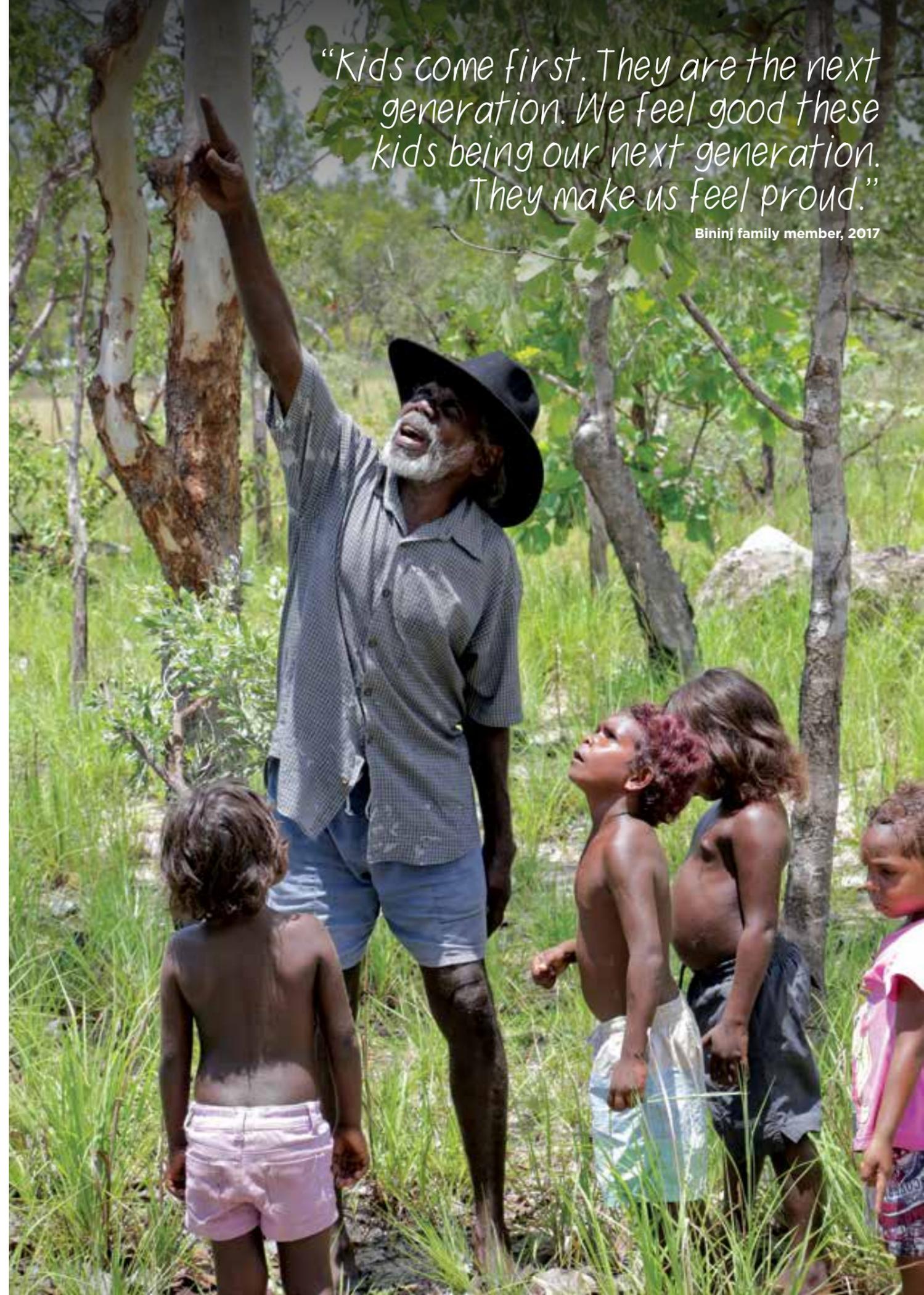
Dr Tim Moore: Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne

Professor Sven Silburn: (ret. previously) Director, Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research

Professor Fiona Arney: Director, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia

"Kids come first. They are the next generation. We feel good these kids being our next generation. They make us feel proud."

Bininj family member, 2017



“Since we began some people have been born, some people have passed away and some have gone down the wrong track. A lot of people are doing really great things. Through all this we have stood together as one family. We have celebrated the joy, shared the pain and helped the people in trouble. Children’s Ground has brought us together and strengthened our community. We have shown that we can make big changes. Bininj are ready to take on the challenges that the future will bring us.”

Bininj family member, 2015



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