



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA



A GOOD START IN LIFE

FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Reducing vulnerability and health inequity
in the Australian Capital Territory

THIS PROJECT IS FUNDED BY THE MEDICAL RESEARCH FUTURE FUND

About the study

The early years of a child's life significantly impacts their health and wellbeing not only during childhood but across the lifespan. Studies published to-date have reported positive lifelong effects of early intervention programmes, not just on educational attainment, but also on income and interaction with the criminal justice system. Research has also demonstrated the effectiveness of high-quality, focused preschool programmes in reducing the effects of social disadvantage, developing children's social competence, physical and emotional health, and preparing children for a successful transition to formal schooling.

In recent years, the health, education and social services sectors have emphasised the importance of the early years of childhood and has renewed its commitment to policies and programmes that support early childhood health, wellbeing and development.

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All Australian governments have committed in recent years, under a series of national partnership agreements and reform initiatives to improve early childhood development. Should the findings be positive, the proposed programme would offer significant national benefits.

What are the current challenges?

While many children in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) are progressing well, an increasing number are falling behind. Data from the most recent national Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in 2018 show significant increases in the percentages of children who are developmentally vulnerable in the five domains of: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication and general knowledge.

What is the main aim of the study?

This study will evaluate a multi-sector, multi-component, and integrated services/supports for improving the health and wellbeing of children who are at risk of developmental vulnerability.

Where will the study be conducted?

Suburbs in the Belconnen District who performed the least well in the most recent Australian Early Development Census (2018) will be included in the study. A wide range of services and programmes to support young children and families will be targeted to these areas of need over a three-year period to improve childhood development.



STUDY AREA
SUBURBS IN THE
BELCONNEN DISTRICT,
CANBERRA



The overall significance of the project is to guide public health policy efforts in promoting health and wellbeing for early childhood (birth to 5 years) and to inform local intervention efforts focused on the community and broader systems level.

How will the project success be measured?

The main measure of success will be the percentage of kindergarten children (age 5) classified as 'developmentally' vulnerable in one or more domains assessed from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC 2024). We anticipate that in our target suburbs, we should see more children moving from at risk or developmentally vulnerable towards on track with their development across domains, compared to the AEDC 2018.

Other measures will include the level of service integration as perceived by service partners and qualitative feedback from programme staff, parents/families to gain the insights and experiences of multiple stakeholder groups. We will seek to understand the multitude of factors that facilitate or impede programme delivery and parental/child engagement, access, uptake of referrals and service utilisation.

What are the programmes being offered?

A wide range of place-based services and activities will be offered, some examples are listed below.

GOOD START IN LIFE ACTIVE PLAY

The *Good Start in Life Active Play* programme (based on the KAPAP) will help train early childhood educators and health professionals to feel confident to promote active play and teach fundamental movement skills to 3–5 year old children. Training includes practical 'hands on' skills sessions to assist educators to apply the learnings in their setting. Types of play encouraged include structured and unstructured play, indoor and outdoor play, playing alone or in a group. Active play encourages fine and gross motor skill development, socialisation, confidence, self-esteem, thinking skills and emotional regulation. This programme enables providers to encourage children to engage in the recommended 25 minutes of active play per day and facilitate free play opportunities.

OUTREACH ALLIED HEALTH

In the ACT, there is an unmet need for timely access to occupational therapy and speech pathology services due to long waiting lists across private and public services. The *Good Start in Life* project provides student-led occupational therapy and speech pathology services to support parents, carers and educators to facilitate child development and participation in Early Childhood Education and Care Centres, preschools and in the community. Services offered will help with language development,

literacy skills, promoting social interaction, play and participating in home, community and early learning environments.

FAMILY LIAISON COORDINATOR

Most children and their caregivers encounter a myriad of systems throughout the course of their child's development. For families who face complex challenges and multiple disadvantages in their everyday lives, navigating the different health, education and community sectors and multiple service networks can be extremely challenging. The Family Liaison Coordinator will work with families and services across our intervention sites to bridge systems and services. The Family Liaison Coordinator will facilitate better connections between professionals, services and sectors, facilitate continuity of care for children, parents and caregivers and support and educate the professionals that they work alongside

LOOSE PARTS PLAY 'POP UPS'

Loose parts play is a type of play that supports invention, divergent thinking, problem solving, helps to develop and refine gross motor-skills and encourages children to challenge themselves and explore their physical abilities in a safe environment. These activities will be provided in public spaces and places, in local neighbourhood areas, playgroups and pre-schools.

Partnerships and engagement

This project is being supported by several partnerships with local stakeholders and organisations:

LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

- **ACT GOVERNMENT** (COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SERVICES, EDUCATION DIRECTORATES)
- **ACT PLAYGROUPS**
- **CANBERRA HEALTH SERVICES**
- **CAPITAL REGION COMMUNITY SERVICES**
- **EVATT PRIMARY SCHOOL**
- **UNITING CARE KIPPAX** (VILLAGE PROJECT)
- **WEST BELCONNEN CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRE**

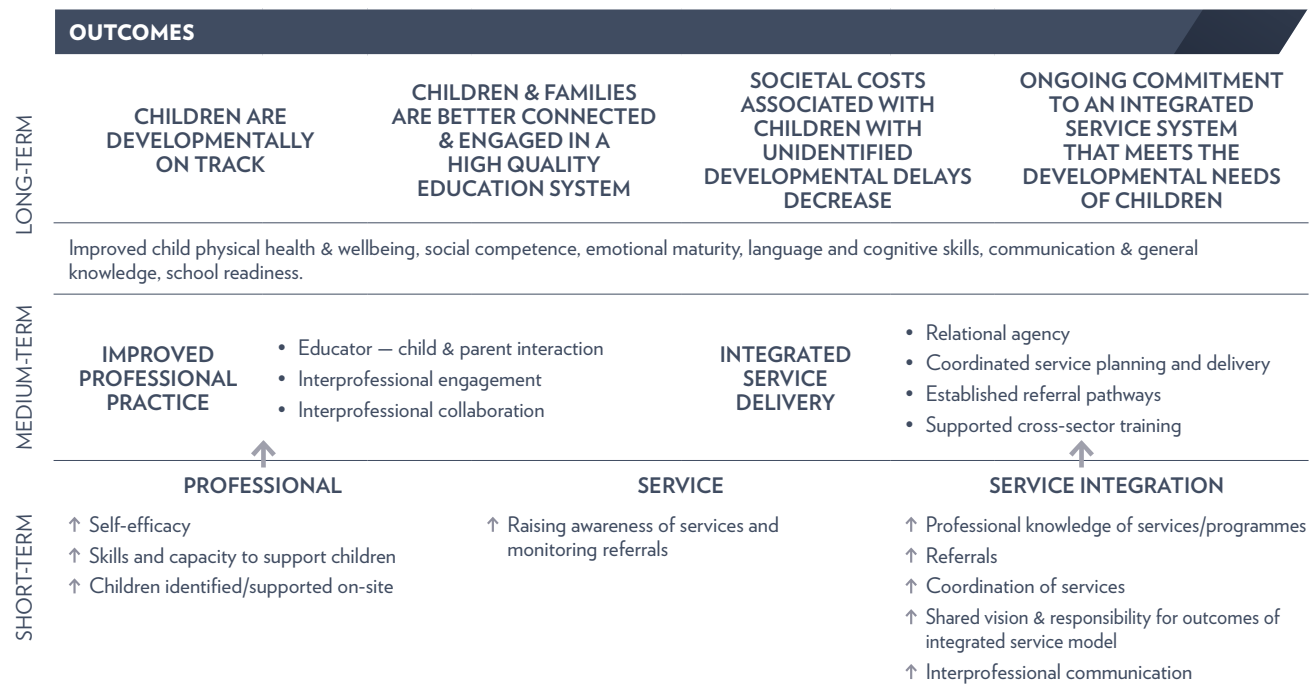
PROJECT ADVISORY BOARD

- **CARLEY JONES** ACT PLAYGROUPS
- **BRIAN MUPANGURE** WEST BELCONNEN CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRE
- **TRACY POWER** AUSTRALIAN EARLY DEVELOPMENT CENSUS
- **ALLISON SULLINGS AND NAOMI MERRITT** CAPITAL REGION COMMUNITY SERVICES
- **ELENA MCEVOY** UNITING CARE KIPPAX
- **CAROLYN THOMAS** CANBERRA HEALTH SERVICES
- **FIONA JARVIS** INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT
- **JANTIENA BATT** EDUCATION DIRECTORATE



GOOD START IN LIFE PROJECT

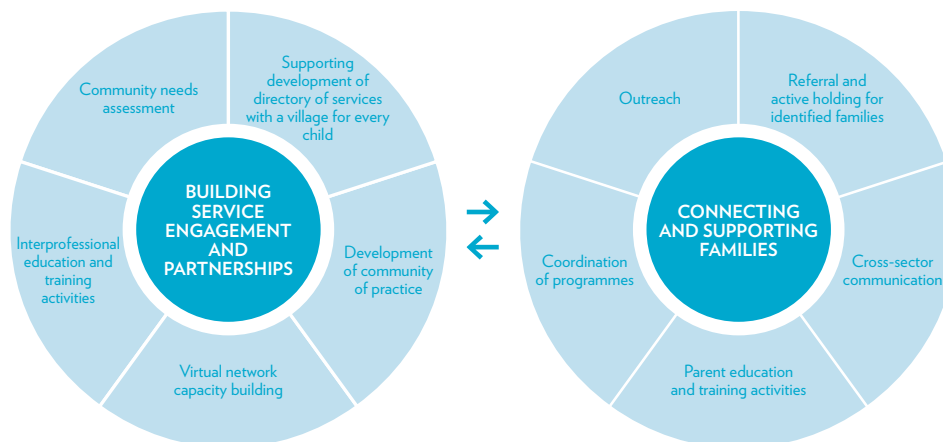
THE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK – GOOD START IN LIFE PROJECT



OUTPUTS



CORE ACTIVITIES



INPUTS

Funding	Liaison coordinator	Clinical educators & UC students	Research team	Technology	Physical assets	Partnerships	Advisory board	Existing services & programmes
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ASSUMPTIONS

- Integrated service delivery across organisational boundaries constitutes an effective system to provide support to vulnerable children and families and create change in parenting practice and child development outcomes.
- Locally based services, and territory based targeted and specialist services have the capacity (human and financial) to contribute to the Good Start in Life service integration.
- Staff will participate and engage in training and other activities. Partner organisations will be involved. Parents and children will engage in activities.

Contact

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