



THE BOORI MILUMBA MODEL

**An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
specific service-led intensive Early
Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)
model**

April 2024




ACKNOWLEDGEMENT


The partners acknowledge the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters now recognised as Australia and pay their respect to the ancestors and Elders of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples past and present.

The project partners are indebted to the children and families who have been willing to participate in the research and evaluation trial of the Boori Milumba model. We also acknowledge the Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre Board and Elders for their endorsement of and contributions to the model through the co-development process and for their naming of the model, Boori Milumba, which means 'child shine' in the local Dharawal language. We also acknowledge their support for building renovations which has seen the community room converted to a space for the three-to-five-year-old preschool program. The community room was previously used for board meetings, the weekly playgroup and women's group. These events are currently being held in other parts of the service and offsite at another location while a capital works grant will be used towards building a three- to five-year-old preschool. Once this is completed, the current three to five learning space will revert to a dedicated community space.

Charlie Ashby, the Cultural Leader at Cullunghutti, created the artwork for the Boori Milumba model and to symbolise the three stages of co-development. We thank Charlie for his creativity and generosity in providing permission to use his artwork within this report. Requests and enquiries concerning the use of the Boori Milumba logo or artwork used across the three stages of co-development should be emailed to manager@cullunghutti.org.au.

Artwork for the figures in this report were created by contemporary artist and teacher, and Cullunghutti board member, Holly Sanders. Holly is a proud Bundjalung woman from the North Coast of New South Wales (NSW) who is currently living on Yuin Country on the South Coast of NSW. Through her artwork, Holly aims to share stories, culture and Country in a contemporary way.





Special thanks are given to Harley Grundy for his exceptional photography and to Kaysha Carlson for her invaluable artwork and photography. These contributions have significantly enriched the visual narrative of this document.

The Partners also express their gratitude to Ria Cleary for her efforts and dedication to synthesising the content gathered for this report, which reflects the invaluable input from all members of the Boori Milumba Steering Committee.

SNAICC - National Voice for our Children and Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre provided the imagery within this report. Do not alter or reproduce imagery without permission from SNAICC.

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1. OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT


This report describes Boori Milumba, an Australian model of early years education and care which has been co-developed with, by and for an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), and with project partners, to meet the cultural, learning and development, strengths and needs of Aboriginal infants and toddlers living with significant family stress and social hardship. The research and theories that provide a foundation for the co-developed model, and the reasoning for the inclusion of key elements and how they will be implemented are detailed within this report. This document draws on the professional and lived experience of project partners, and we extend our gratitude to all individuals and groups involved. We would like to specifically recognise and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose invaluable contributions have shaped this resource. In particular, the cultural authority of SNAICC, the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the remarkable leadership of Cullunghutti Child and Family Centre Board of Directors, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), service staff and families whose expertise, insights and efforts have played a pivotal role in this project.

1.1 Partners

Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre (Cullunghutti) is a registered public benevolent institution charity that has as its mission to be a significant place of importance for Aboriginal children and families to connect, grow, and learn together, reflecting and strengthening Aboriginal identity within the wider community. Cullunghutti has deep knowledge of their community and significant expertise in delivering evidence-based services to improve outcomes for children and families including a not-for-profit early learning service. Cullunghutti is an ACCO taking part to co-develop a model to trial at their service.

Cullunghutti would like to acknowledge the Wadi Wadi Wandanian People, the traditional custodians of the land on which the service is built and the land on which staff, children and their families work and live upon today. We pay our respects to our Elders both past and present for providing us with guidance and sharing their wisdom. We acknowledge our children for they are our future leaders.

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (SNAICC) is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Operating for nearly 40 years, SNAICC has deep knowledge, networks, and expertise on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood development, safety, and wellbeing. SNAICC has an all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board and Council, comprising of representatives from early childhood, child protection and family support services across all Australian jurisdictions.



Parkville Institute is an innovative research and practice institute established as a not-for-profit organisation in 2021. Parkville Institute's key purpose is to improve the life trajectories of young children experiencing significant social disadvantage and family stress through generating robust and balanced research that will advance evidence-informed policy and practice in the early childhood education and care sector and to grow the capacity and capability of the early childhood workforce. Government and philanthropic funding supports Parkville Institute's work with ECEC service providers and other partners.

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is a social purpose organisation that works with partners to alleviate disadvantage – towards an Australia where all people and communities thrive. SVA influence systems to deliver better social outcomes for people by learning about what works in communities, helping organisations be more effective, sharing our perspectives and advocating for change.

SVA's Young Children Thriving (**YCT**) program that strives to transform the early childhood development landscape in Australia. Our vision is for an Australia where all children, regardless of where they live or the challenges their families face, have the opportunities and supports they need to thrive.

Research and evaluation partner

Associate Professor Yi-Ping Tseng from the Melbourne Institute, University of Melbourne, will evaluate the Boori Milumba model and the outcomes for children and families in partnership with SNAICC to ensure cultural safety and with Parkville Institute.

Project and program funders

The Australian Government is funding the research trial of the Boori Milumba model. Additional funding is provided from philanthropic funding partners including the Paul Ramsay Foundation and the Wiggs Family Foundation.

1.2 Introduction

The Boori Milumba model trial builds on a previous randomised controlled trial research project undertaken by the University of Melbourne. The multidisciplinary research project established that targeted and intensive, high quality ECEC can lead to large and significant improvements in a child's cognitive and language skills, resilience and socio-emotional development and learning. Additionally, children who received the intervention in the trial had the skills and attributes to transitioned into formal schooling as confident and capable learners.

Associate Professor Brigid Jordan AM and Dr Anne Kennedy from Parkville Institute were members of the multidisciplinary research team at the University of Melbourne who undertook the research and evaluation of the Early Years Education Program (EYEP) model.

EYEP was initiated by Kids First, previously the Children's Protection Society (CPS), an independent not-for-profit child and family services organisation based in the north-east of Melbourne which was founded in 1896. The program was designed and implemented by CPS in collaboration with Associate Professor Brigid Jordan and Dr Anne Kennedy.

Jordan and Kennedy published a report on a description of the EYEP model in 2019. Tseng, Jordan, Borland, Coombs, Cotter, Guillou, Hill, Kennedy and Sheehan (2019), and Tseng, Jordan, Borland, Clarke, Coombs, Cotter, Guillou, Hill, Kennedy and Sheehan (2022) published two reports on the research methodology and the children's outcomes.

In 2020, in recognition of the remarkable learning and developmental outcomes for children who participated in the original trial, Associate Professor Brigid Jordan AM and Dr Anne Kennedy, with support from SVA, advocated for new research funding with the Australian Government. Associate Professor Brigid Jordan AM and Dr Anne Kennedy, established Parkville Institute as a research and practice institute in 2021 and now serve as the Executive Director and the Interim Board Chair, respectively.

In 2021, the Australian Government agreed to provide funding to support the replication research trial of an intensive ECEC model over three years at four sites and requested that one site be a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander site. In Parkville Institute's and SVA's discussion with the Australian Government, it was agreed that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific ECEC program should be led by SNAICC, the National Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and in partnership with an ACCO. Following the government's funding agreement with Parkville Institute for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander initiative, SVA as a system's catalyst organisation, brokered a meeting with SNAICC and Parkville Institute to seek their involvement and leadership of a project to design, develop, implement and evaluate a new, culturally safe and responsive ECEC program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The non-Indigenous partners recognised the challenges faced by ACCOs when they committed to using a co-development approach as a way to disrupt the 'legacy of colonialism' (Choate and Tortorelli, 2022, p.6) with its disempowerment and silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. Under SNAICC's leadership, Parkville Institute and SVA agreed that a co-development approach to a new ECEC model design would be more inclusive, culturally safe and support empowerment and self-determination for an ACCO and its local community. This approach recognised Aboriginal leadership and expertise and the extraordinary work that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services do in developing and implementing high quality, culturally appropriate, holistic ECEC programs for their children.

SNAICC provided leadership and support for a tendering process in New South Wales (NSW) in order to identify an ACCO service with the necessary governance, child and family experience, community readiness and systems in place to work as the service provider partner in the co-development project. In September 2022, Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre in East Nowra, NSW was selected through a rigorous process as the site for the ECEC co-development project.



1.3 The Boori Milumba Model

The aim of the model is to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experiencing significant family stress and social hardship to thrive and start school as confident and successful learners, strong in their culture and identity; and to build evidence to inform the Australian Government on future policy and funding requirements to support equity goals. The aims, therefore, are immediate benefits for participating children and families and longer-term benefits across the sector so that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are afforded access to holistic, culturally responsive, high quality ECEC for their children.

The Boori Milumba model has been designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under three years of age at enrolment, who are at heightened risk of or who have experienced significant social disadvantage and social hardship.

The Boori Milumba model was developed using a co-development approach over an eighteen-month time frame. For detailed insights into this approach, please refer to:

- *Co-development Framework: For developing an intensive early childhood education and care program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (v2, 2024).*
- *A Journey of Co-development: The Boori Milumba Model (2024).*

Cullunghutti has provided high-quality culturally appropriate early education and care and preschool programs since their establishment in 2014. Early discussions in the co-development process with the Cullunghutti leadership and staff team identified the strengths of their current practices aligning with the National Regulation standards, the issues they found challenging in ECEC service provision to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and their vision for what improvements could be made with access to increased resources (financial, building knowledge, expertise and capacity building). SNAICC brought their cultural authority, deep knowledge of the ACCO workforce and policy settings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and services. Parkville Institute's team brought their practice and research knowledge in ECEC, social work and infant mental health, including their experience with the EYEP model. In co-development meetings over many months, it was decided to include elements of the EYEP model, with varying levels of intensity, and to design novel elements for the Boori Milumba model to suit an ACCO centre's specific strengths, aspirations and needs.

The Boori Milumba model has been designed with the intention of building the evidence base for advocacy concerned with improving learning, developmental and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The evidence from this research project will have cultural authority and meaning as the project has been led by SNAICC and informed by the wisdom and experience of an ACCO. The impact of the Boori Milumba model is being evaluated through the Melbourne Institute, University of Melbourne. To support consistency and continuity, members of the research team involved in the EYEP research trial are also involved in the research evaluation of the Boori Milumba model.

The Boori Milumba model is demonstrative of an ACCO service led co-development process that is informed by local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice, as well as evidence, knowledge and insights drawn from EYEP. Parkville Institute's programs and those of its partners are not affiliated with, endorsed by, or otherwise associated with, CPS (trading as Kids First).




2. RESEARCH & INNOVATION

2.1 Research & Innovation in ECEC

The current universal ECEC system in Australia struggles to adequately address the specific needs of children and families experiencing significant family stress and social disadvantage. Australian Early Developmental Census (AEDC) data provides evidence of the urgency and complexity of need; 33% of children from low socio-economic areas and 44% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school (2019). For children living with significant and multiple vulnerabilities and risk factors, there is powerful evidence of the need for a targeted 'intensive care' ECEC model nested within universal provision, where the program elements, and the dosage and duration of the intervention are able to redress harms, overcome the effects of trauma, reduce toxic stress levels and enable children to learn and develop in partnership with their families and communities (Shonkoff, 2011).

Globally, there are systems and funding options that prioritise ECEC access and participation for children considered vulnerable or at risk (Beach, Friendly, Nguyen, Borges Nogueira, Taylor, Mohamed, Rothman, and Forer, 2023). This is also reflected in legislation that specifically supports children identified as vulnerable or disadvantaged and addresses barriers to children's access and participation in ECEC (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), 2021).

These mechanisms are also evident across Australia, specifically through ECEC eligibility criteria which preferences the intake of children identified as 'high priority children' through the provision of priority of access (State Government of Victoria, 2022). Rationale for such legislation is recognition of the preventative and protective effects of ECEC. This includes reducing developmental vulnerability through providing a strong foundation for current and future learning, development and wellbeing, which can reduce the experience of learning poverty, particularly when starting school (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2023).



The Front Project's report (2022, p.5) showed that within Australia, there are thousands of children whose learning and life trajectories have been guided 'back on track' through accessing and participating within quality ECEC and that disadvantaged children are likely to benefit the most from participation in ECEC. While this is impactful, research indicates that about one in five children in Australia will be developmentally vulnerable in at least one or more domain by the time they commence formal schooling (Noble, Rehill, Solis, Dakin and Harris, 2023). Knowing the lifelong impacts of developmental vulnerability on social, health, education and wellbeing outcomes, more is needed to help children, families and communities to access ECEC and the related resources and supports which can help children to thrive in their current and future lives.

2.2 Research & Innovation in an ACCO: The Case for Change

Despite its known importance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children access ECEC programs at 75% of the rate of other children (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2020). Children from low socio-economic backgrounds, which includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, also access ECEC at a lower dosage and duration, and often attend poor quality services (Tayler, Cloney, Adams, Ishimine, Thorpe, and Nguyen, 2016).

Addressing the impacts of trauma and inequality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly for those who have been exposed to significant family stress and the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma, requires a unique and innovative approach to education and care nested within universal early childhood services. This requires contextually responsive and innovative strategies that aren't a duplicate or replication of existing models.

Importantly, if we are committed to changing the life trajectories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, we need wrap around services and programs that are culturally safe and responsive and delivered in culturally safe spaces led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As the Family Matters Report 2023 (SNAICC, 2023) reiterates, there is a need to recognise the success of Aboriginal led solutions for determining what works best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.



ACCOs are uniquely placed to address access barriers for children, as well as provide the delivery of integrated supports for families (SNAICC, 2019). ACCO early years services generally apply a contextually responsive, community led and integrated service delivery model that understands the aspirations, strengths, and needs of children and families at their centre. Their goal is to support all children, including the most vulnerable within their communities to thrive. However, these services face a range of operational and structural challenges in meeting their goal and they often grapple with a policy and funding system that does not fully recognise their unique value, strengths and needs.

Closing the Gap (Australian Government, 2020) and AEDC data (2019) indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not entering school developmentally and educationally equal to their non-Indigenous peers. When data on Aboriginal children's outcomes has not shifted in over a decade, there is a compelling case for change and innovation. In 2021, the Australian Government recognised that evidence from the EYEP Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT), combined with the research and practice expertise held by the directors of the Parkville Institute, provided a robust platform and foundation for innovation in an early childhood program to redress the outcomes' gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.



3. GAPS IN EVIDENCE

Overview

In Australia, gaps in learning and developmental outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children continue to persist. As Arcos Holzinger and Biddle (2015) acknowledge, increasing the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within ECEC is just one component of improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Another necessary component is a need to focus on researching and implementing pedagogical practices that support and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and values. While there is growing awareness of the importance of culture and identity on children's health and wellbeing, indicators of children's sense of self, identity and pride in their culture continue to be overlooked and therefore underreported in research and policy (Noble et al., 2023).

To close the evidence gaps in research, policy and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, a shift is required in the way ECEC policies and programs are designed, delivered and evaluated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and community. This includes:

- Designing culturally sensitive ECEC programs that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to positively build on their identity, culture and sense of self, as this has been identified as an enabler in supporting best outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (The Healing Foundation and Emerging Minds, 2020). This also assists Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to commence formal schooling with a strong foundation of cultural knowledge and values on which they can continue to build upon and strengthen (Arcos Holzinger and Biddle, 2015).
- Acknowledging that academics, governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people agree that ACCOs are best placed to deliver health and social services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (SNAICC, 2022).

A shift is underway reflecting these inclusions as evident by the increasing focus of early years initiatives aimed at:

- Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's and families' engagement with health and ECEC services.
- Working alongside communities to collaboratively design goals and solutions that support and respond to the identified needs of a community by and for that specific community.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION AND PROJECT AIMS

Research Questions

This research project seeks to answer the question “Does participation in the Boori Milumba model support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to become confident, capable learners, strong in their culture, and developmentally and educationally equivalent to their non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peers?”

Evaluation will be conducted to answer two research questions:

1. Does the Boori Milumba model significantly improve children’s developmental and learning outcomes?
2. How does participation in the Boori Milumba model affect children’s connections to Country and Culture?

The research findings will indicate the effectiveness of the Boori Milumba model in improving the developmental and learning trajectories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living with significant family stress and social hardship.

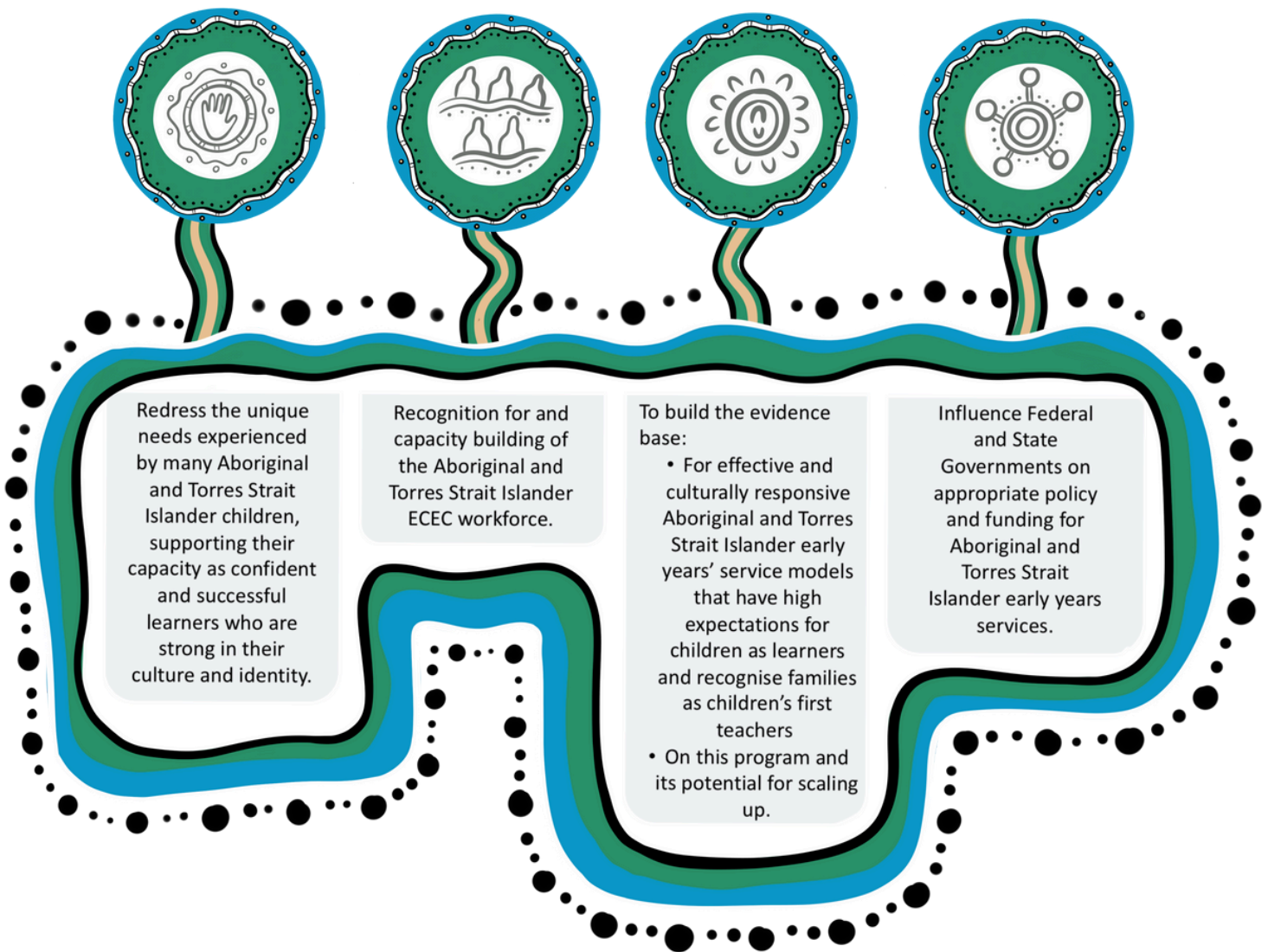
This project also provides an exciting opportunity to build the evidence on co-developed programs that support strong outcomes in the early years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Recommendations will be made for scaling up the model based on the evaluation.

The co-development process was strategically chosen and designed to acknowledge Aboriginal leadership, expertise and the extraordinary work that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early years services do in developing and implementing high quality, holistic ECEC models for the benefit of their children, families and communities. For further insights into undertaking co-development with an ACCO, please refer to the following complementary documents:

- *Co-development Framework*: For developing an intensive early childhood education and care program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- *A Journey of Co-development: The Boori Milumba Model*.

Aims and Anticipated Outcomes

Figure 1: Aims of the Boori Milumba model

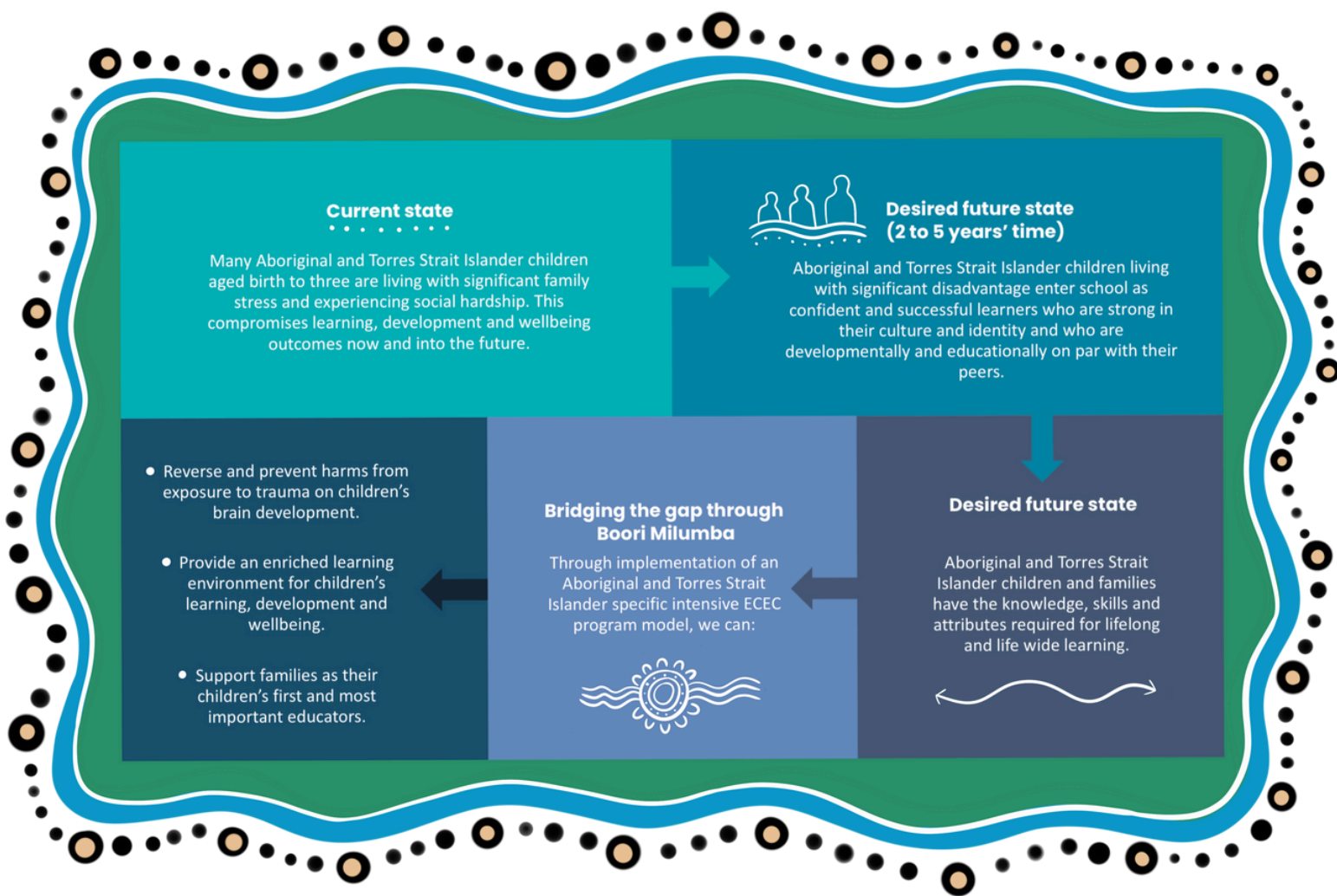


Anticipated outcomes of the Boori Milumba model

The partners identified a range of anticipated outcomes from the enactment of the model over a three year research trial. These outcomes are summarised below.

- Up to 34 young children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing significant stress and hardship have improved learning and developmental outcomes, and start school culturally strong, ready for learning and thriving.
- Increased local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and workforce capability, with centre staff receiving ongoing, targeted, high quality professional development, and gaining deep expertise and experience in the co-developed ECEC model.

- Increased capacity to modify and scale the co-developed model to see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experiencing significant stress and hardship start school thriving and on par with their peers.
- Improved capacity to advocate for national systems change as a result of robust evidence base specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services.
- Influence policy and funding changes needed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child and family centres to meet the aspirations, strengths and needs of their families, children and communities.



5. EVIDENTIAL BACKGROUND FOR THE BOORI MILUMBA MODEL

Overview

Gaps in learning and developmental trajectories remain for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These gaps continue through formal schooling and are reflected in poorer health and wellbeing, employment and socio-economic outcomes across the lifespan of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Gaps will persist if we continue to provide ECEC models that do not meet identified aspirations, strengths and needs and which fail to draw on the extensive knowledge base and wisdom of specific communities.

Clearly, there is a need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC interventions to be identified within specific communities so that program inclusions or elements are co-developed alongside, with, and for community. The Boori Milumba model aims to meet that need while simultaneously providing an evidence base for the inclusion and embedded implementation of culturally responsive practices. Having data on the learning, developmental and cultural impact of the embedded implementation of culturally responsive practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will support filling gaps in evidence, policy and program design, and ultimately, the goal of closing the gap.

The Boori Milumba model has been co-developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under three years of age at enrolment, who are at heightened risk of, or who have experienced significant social disadvantage and social hardship. Children identified as meeting the eligibility criteria are able to participate in the model. With family member or carer consent, they will participate in the program at the centre for five hours a day (total of 25 hours a week), for 50 weeks of the year, for three years. There is no cost for eligible families or carers, which ensures cost is not a barrier to children's participation in the program.



Data on children's learning and development will be collected on entry, and after one and two years in the program.

Participation in the model provides each child with access to:

- Responsive, respectful relationships with attuned, experienced, skilled educators.
- Enriched, inclusive and culturally appropriate learning environments.
- Culturally based and embedded learning experiences.
- Differentiated pedagogy to meet individual abilities.
- High quality pedagogy and curriculum.
- 75% of their daily nutrition requirements.





6. EVIDENCE REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT OF STRUCTURAL AND PROCESS QUALITY ELEMENTS FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND STAFF

International research indicates that high quality ECEC can affect outcomes for children over a short- and long-term perspective (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), 2021). The organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Report, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care* (2006), recognised the importance of both structural and process quality for ensuring quality programs for children attending ECEC services.

Within the Australian context, quality of ECEC is recognised as substantial and significant (Boyd and Phillips, 2023). Much research has been and continues to be undertaken to ascertain the factors that underpin quality in the provision of education and care programs for children. To support national consistency, the National Quality Standard (NQS) (Australian Children's Education and Care Authority, 2018a) is a benchmark for determining indicators of quality ECEC practices occurring at a service level. The NQS (ACECQA, 2018a) encompasses seven quality areas that reflect both process and structural elements of quality and connect with important outcomes for young children. During the assessment and rating process, authorised officers gather evidence through the methods of observe, sight and discuss. Evidence is then measured and analysed against the seven quality standards, which are underpinned by regulatory standards (ACECQA, 2018b). The service will be given a rating for each of the seven quality areas, which then determines the overall rating for the service.

6.1 Structural quality

Structural quality is recognised as the quality of the conditions of the ECEC centre, including staffing numbers and their working conditions (Janta, van Belle and Stewart, 2016). Pendergast and Garvis (2013) reference structural elements of quality as being 'relatively fixed and easily measured' (p.5). In Australia, examples of structural quality are often sighted and checked off against relevant guiding documents such as the Education and Care Services National Law (2010) and Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011). Janta et al., 2016 references that structural quality is usually measured by inputs (human, financial and time resources) that are essential to ECEC service delivery.

Researchers, Howard, Siraj, Kingston, Neilsen-Hewett, Melhuish, de Rosnay and Luu, 2015; and Slot, 2018, for example, identify a range of structural quality elements including:

- The size of groups.
- Staff qualifications, skills and experience.
- Educator to child ratios.
- The physical environment, equipment and resources.
- Family supports.
- Health, nutrition and safety considerations.
- Relevant early learning frameworks.
- Professional development and professional learning for leadership and staff teams.
- Service and staff conditions.
- Service and educational leadership.

6.1.1 What is the impact of structural quality elements on children, families and staff?

Historically, research on structural variables including smaller group sizes, lower staff turnover and highly qualified staff who are knowledgeable regarding child development, has been associated with improved cognitive development (Dalgaard, Blondebjerg, Klokke, Viinholt, and Dietrichson, 2022; ROGS 2023). Structural quality elements relating to strategies and practices for family and community can be used to provide increased support for disadvantaged families and well supported transitions to formal schooling (Janta et al., 2016).

6.2 Process quality

Process quality elements relate to the characteristics and dynamics of the education and care setting and the experiences occurring within it. These experiences and their related social interactions are what drive children's learning and development (Slot, Leseman, Verhagen, and Mulder, 2015). Examples of process quality are contextual and relational. In Australia, process quality elements are measured during the assessment and rating process by observing educator and child interactions, and how children engage with others and the learning environment during play-based experiences and routines (ACECQA, 2021). Researchers, including Janta et al., 2016; Siraj et al, 2015; and Slot, 2018, have identified that process quality includes a range of elements:

- Relationships and interactions between staff and children and staff and families.
- Teaching or pedagogical practices.
- Classroom organisation.
- How children interact with each other (peer relationships).
- Play based learning experiences.
- Individualised and inclusive programs.
- Time (temporal) and space matters.
- Partnerships with families and community.
- Collaboration with other professionals.
- Curriculum provision to support children's holistic learning and development.

6.2.1 What is the impact of process quality elements on children, families and staff?

Janta et al, (2016) iterate that process quality elements are experienced by children, families and staff in every day encounters that can engender a strong sense of welcome and belonging, which motivates participation and engagement. When children experience individualised, sensitive, non-judgemental interactions with every staff member, they are open to learning and to using the resources available to support their learning. Additionally, service leadership, and the extent to which staff feel they are supported, increases their sense of belonging within the team and promotes a collective vision and mission within the service. Pedagogical leadership as an element of process quality also contributes to improved teaching and learning practices and therefore improved outcomes (Slot, 2018). There is also evidence that alongside the home environment, process quality is the primary driver of children's development and learning (Melhuish, Ereky-Stevens, Petrogiannis, Ariescu, Penderi, Rentzou, Tawell, Broekhuizen, Slot, and Leseman, 2015). Following the summary of available research regarding process quality elements, the OECD (2022) reported the sensitivity and responsiveness of educators, the quality of their interactions and capacity to scaffold and provide extensions to children's learning and thinking was crucial to achieving quality outcomes for children.

6.3 Complex and dynamic interaction between structural and process quality elements

The relationship between and how structural and process quality elements interact is complex (Eadie, Page, Levickis, Elek, Murray, Wang and Lloyd-Johnsen, 2022). While structural and process quality elements differ, they are interconnected and offer distinct ways to understand, identify, appreciate and measure quality in ECEC settings (Janta et al., 2016). Research continues in investigating how they work together to affect children's development, learning and wellbeing.

Evidence suggests that different features and related practices of structural and quality elements are paramount to best practice, achieving high quality outcomes for children and with the ongoing implementation of impactful continuous improvement initiatives (Eadie et al., 2022). International research shows that the process and quality of educator to child interactions and interactions amongst children are effective for predicting outcomes for children (Melhuish et al., 2015; and Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). When determining quality and quality improvement in ECEC service delivery, it is essential to have strong structural quality elements as a foundation from which to build processes quality elements.



7. THE BOORI MILUMBA MODEL

Structural quality features are considered a key prerequisite for process quality, which is most strongly related to child learning, development and wellbeing (Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, and Vandergrift, 2010). The two quality elements interact dynamically in ways that impact positively on the outcomes for children, families and staff in an ECEC setting. Such research provides the underpinning and rationale for prioritising specific structural and process quality elements and the details of their practice implementation to scaffold the high-quality work of the Boori Milumba model.

The Boori Milumba model is a co-developed, unique ECEC model. Through the process of co-development over eighteen months of yarning and discussion, non-Indigenous project partners shared their past and current experience with ECEC program design and implementation. Cullunghutti shared their current program practices, aspirations and needs and worked with the partners to determine the structural and process quality elements they wanted to include in their intensive ECEC model. The model is informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge and practices; the knowledge and practices of infant mental health; theories and practices of early learning, pedagogy and curriculum; family systems theories and practice; and child development knowledge. The Boori Milumba model includes some elements that were novel in the EYEP (Jordan and Kennedy, 2019) and elements with different levels of intensity. Some quality elements that have always been part of the Cullunghutti early learning program such as the provision of transport for some children and a focus on supporting families were retained and strengthened.

Through the co-development process, Cullunghutti also identified additional quality elements that reflected their community's aspirations, needs, contexts and place including the Cultural Framework and Cultural Leadership role informing the enactment of the model.

For an overview on how specific elements were agreed upon for inclusion and adjusted to suit the contextual needs of the service, please refer to A Journey of Co-development report (DE, 2024).

7.1 The Cultural Framework


Through the co-development process, four interlinking elements were identified for the provision of a program that was culturally safe and responsive to the individual child, educator, and family and carer needs and wants. These elements are a Cultural Framework; a Cultural Leader role; the ongoing development and implementation of cultural plans for children and staff, and regular cultural supervision for staff.

The Boori Milumba Cultural Framework is a key quality element developed through the co-development process. The Cultural Framework is a value-based system to support effective communication, trusting and respectful relationships and deeper understandings, and learning regarding cultural knowledge, practices and identity (Gopalkrishnan, 2019). Through the Cultural Framework and the three interlinking elements, there is a strong focus on whole child development and learning. This includes the essential focus of who each child is culturally, as this is core to each child's identity and each child's strong development of their identity (Choate and Tortorelli, 2022).

The creation of the full-time Cultural Leader role ensures there are systems in place to enact the Cultural Framework and embed culturally safe and responsive practices across the model for children, educators, families and carers. The Australian Indigenous Governance Institute's Indigenous Governance Toolkit (2023) recognises a Cultural Leadership role with sharing, transmitting and also strengthening cultural knowledge, while providing cultural leadership advice, advocating for Country and language revival. The Cultural Leader will provide ongoing cultural training and utilise cultural supervision sessions with individual staff each month to yarn about their cultural plans. Such practices support:

- Provision of clarity around cultural protocols and nuances.
- The reduction of feelings of cultural load that staff may be experiencing.
- Educators building their confidence and expertise to embed cultural responsiveness throughout the program's delivery.

The Australian Government-Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) National framework for protecting Australia's children indicators web report (2022) references cultural plans as an individualised plan that are intended to develop and maintain a child's cultural identity through enhancing family, community and cultural connections while they are in ECEC. Cultural plans will ensure that planning and decision making around program implementation and cultural practices are culturally appropriate and in the best interests of each child as part of their cultural learning progression.



Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia (V.2.0, AGDE, 2022) views children's growth, learning, development and wellbeing through the interconnected concepts of being, belonging and becoming. The individual cultural plans acknowledge and strengthen these EYLF concepts by providing the opportunity to:

- Support each child's sense of belonging in relation to their culture, community and Country.
- Support each child's becoming by further bridging the gap from ECEC services to school and continued delivery of culturally strong practices into and across the child's school journey. Specifically:
 - Offering supplementary and more in-depth and breadth of cultural knowledge that can be captured within the Transition to School Digital Statement.
 - Providing primary school teachers and Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) staff within unique insights into where each child is at in their cultural journey. This encompasses the cultural knowledge and understandings children bring with them, where they are in terms of their sense of belonging and what the next steps are in their cultural journey. This also supports longevity and sustainability in terms of cultural practices and ensures children don't become occasional visitors to their culture (Choate and Tortorelli, 2022).

The use of cultural plans for each child recognises and respects families as children's first teachers. Importantly, the cultural plans acknowledge families and carers as a valuable resource, and support an ongoing collaboration with families and carers which in turn supports their child/ren's holistic development (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (European Commission), 2021). As Grant (2020) states, 'Identity-what it is to belong and it starts with family' (p.5). The cultural plans will sit alongside each child's education plan and will be discussed with their family or carer at the goal setting and review meetings every 12 weeks. The Cultural Leader may attend these meetings to provide educator and/or family or carer support.

Children will be supported to learn about culture on Country, through regular excursions to local places of significance. This recognises the third environment (Country) as a teacher and supports place-based education through emphasising the connection between the learning process and physical space where educators and children are located (Yemini, Engel and Simon, 2023). Opportunities to go out on Country also support each child's sense of being and belonging in relation to place and actively promotes concepts around care for Country and sustainable practices (V2.0, AGDE, 2022).

The Cultural Framework supports the embedding of cultural experiences in the children's program. Cultural routines and traditions are imperative for supporting children to grow strong in their culture and to be proud of their cultural identity (Warren, 2021). Other culturally embedded practices in the program include participating in an Acknowledgement of Country and flag raising ceremony each day, the use of local language/s, and the sharing of local stories and local dances.

We acknowledge that it is difficult, inapplicable and inappropriate to request a 'qualification' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within community as formal qualifications aren't given. We respect and understand that recognition is gained within community alongside experience and knowledge learnt and shared across a person's lifetime. This recognition transcends formal qualifications yet could be considered equivalent or more to a subject matter expert regarding knowledge, lore and beliefs. This is an important consideration when determining staff suitability for respectfully teaching cultural practices and delivering cultural programs and training.



7.2 Leadership and staffing

7.2.1 Leadership team

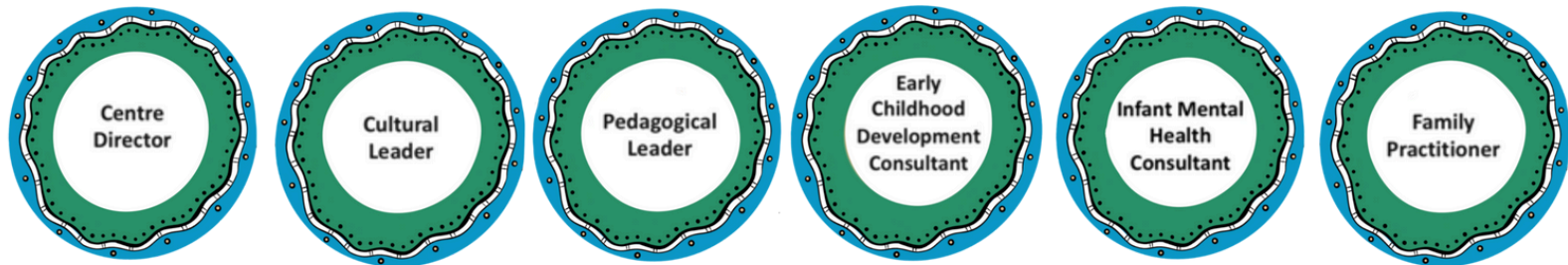
Leadership is a key driver and foundation for the provision of quality in ECEC settings (Gibbs, 2020). High quality provision supports improving and sustaining children's learning outcomes. Theories of adaptive and multidisciplinary leadership shift leadership from a focus on individual responsibility to a shared responsibility approach. Adaptive leadership recognises the complexities and challenges inherent in the operations of service type organisations (Michaels, 2023).

The model incorporates a leadership structure designed to ensure the leadership team are responsible for the oversight and embedding of the key elements of the model and that staff are supported to implement the model. Within the Boori Milumba model, an adaptive leadership approach has been intentionally adopted to utilise the collective experience, skills and commitment of the leadership team in supporting informed decision-making and in providing guidance for all the staff. Adaptive leadership reflects collective decision-making and co-operative processes, which take into consideration the individual and combined knowledge, and experience of the leadership team (Michaels, 2023). A shared approach is essential when supporting children and families living with significant hardship and in the provision of timely and culturally sensitive supports.

The leadership team uses a multidisciplinary approach to enhance the integration of diverse professional knowledge and experiences in the provision of individualised education and care and cultural plans that are responsive to each child's abilities, strengths and interests. Each leader sees a clear connection between and across their roles, with all leaders actively working to increase the professional knowledge of each other and the enactment of the Boori Milumba model.

The leadership team within the Boori Milumba model is comprised of six positions (Figure 3).


Figure 3: Boori Milumba leadership team



The model includes a fulltime Pedagogical Leader and a full-time Centre Director, both of whom have graduate qualifications and extensive experience in ECEC settings including ACCOs and with the delivery of inclusion services.

While the leadership team works as a multidisciplinary team, the Boori Milumba model acknowledges the instrumental role of the Centre Director, particularly as they are also the nominated supervisor. Cullunghutti acknowledges that within ACCO early years services, the community acknowledges the Centre Director as a person with a position of authority who holds everything together. The Centre Director's key responsibilities include providing leadership for the staff team, supporting the enactment of the centre philosophy, operational and risk management, oversight of the children's program, working with families or carers, building professional networks in the community and collaborating with the leadership team.


The Pedagogical Leader has responsibility for leading the pedagogical and curriculum quality in the Boori Milumba model. Pedagogy and curriculum are central to achieving improved outcomes for children within the Boori Milumba model. The Pedagogical Leader will work closely with the Cultural Leader to ensure alignment between the in-nature pedagogy occurring within the service and on Country, and to ensure outcomes related to children's culture, learning and wellbeing are aligned. The Pedagogical Leader provides coaching, mentoring and guidance for the staff, encouraging reflective practice and supporting their program planning, implementation and monitoring of children's progress as learners. The role also involves leading the development and maintenance of the centre's Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and collaborating with the leadership team to ensure the model is implemented as designed and in accordance with approved Learning Frameworks.



The Cultural Leader has cultural authority and provides the leadership team and the teachers and educators with guidance and practical support to ensure that the model's Cultural Framework is embedded into the program in culturally safe and responsive ways. The Cultural Leader will be actively engaged in the development and enactment of each child's cultural plan and will lead the on Country weekly experiences. As a respected holder of cultural knowledge, traditions, protocols, wisdom and experience, the Cultural Leader is critical to the implementation of the Boori Milumba model.

The Family Practitioner has overall responsibility for leading the implementation of the family engagement and support elements of the program model. They have a particular focus on understanding and responding to the family stress and hardship experienced by children and their families, providing crisis response or brief intervention or referral to children and families to support their participation in the program and to help them navigate any barriers to participation. They work collaboratively with families and the leadership team to assist them to identify support needs and be empowered to access specialised services, engage with government and non-government service providers. In consultation with the leadership and staff team and the child's family, they liaise with any statutory and voluntary services involved with children participating in the program as appropriate.

The Infant Mental Health Consultant contributes specialist infant mental health knowledge and skills to inform the curriculum and pedagogy implemented by the teachers and educators. They assess each child's individual ways of responding to exposure to trauma and loss, threats to attachment security and other stressors. The role includes advising teachers and educators and other staff on individualised and differentiated teaching and caring strategies to reduce the behavioural and emotional dysregulation resulting from living with high levels of family stress and hardship so that children can become successful learners. They provide regular consultation to the staff team regarding emotional, social and behavioural issues for particular children that may be impeding their learning. They also provide an infant mental health perspective in collaboration with the leadership team on program implementation and centre operations, anticipating issues or practices and protocols that may have emotional impact for children to ensure that the program supports the emotional wellbeing of the children.



The Early Child Development Consultant contributes expertise in the identification of atypical development, working with families to assist them to understand their child's individual developmental profile and any impact on learning, identifying if children need specialist assessment and intervention, and supporting educators through consultation and coaching to ensure that individual learning plans and teaching strategies are aligned with children's individual capacities. They support the teaching staff to identify children who show signs of atypical development, neurodevelopmental disabilities or complex health needs, assess when children's development can be supported by families and in the room or if children may need referral to specialist assessment and intervention services. They also work collaboratively with families to support them to understand their child's strengths and challenges in learning and development particularly when there are emerging signs of atypical development.

The Infant Mental Health Consultant and the Early Child Development Consultant both work three days a week. The time allocation for the roles recognises the higher rates of developmental challenges and exposures to stress and trauma that Aboriginal children and families face. These part-time roles will overlap with each other and the whole leadership team for two days a week facilitating clear communication and ways of working between all the leadership team members. This also supports multidisciplinary conversations that are important to determine if particular children need extra supports in the classroom or outside the program and which team member is best placed to provide or facilitate this support.

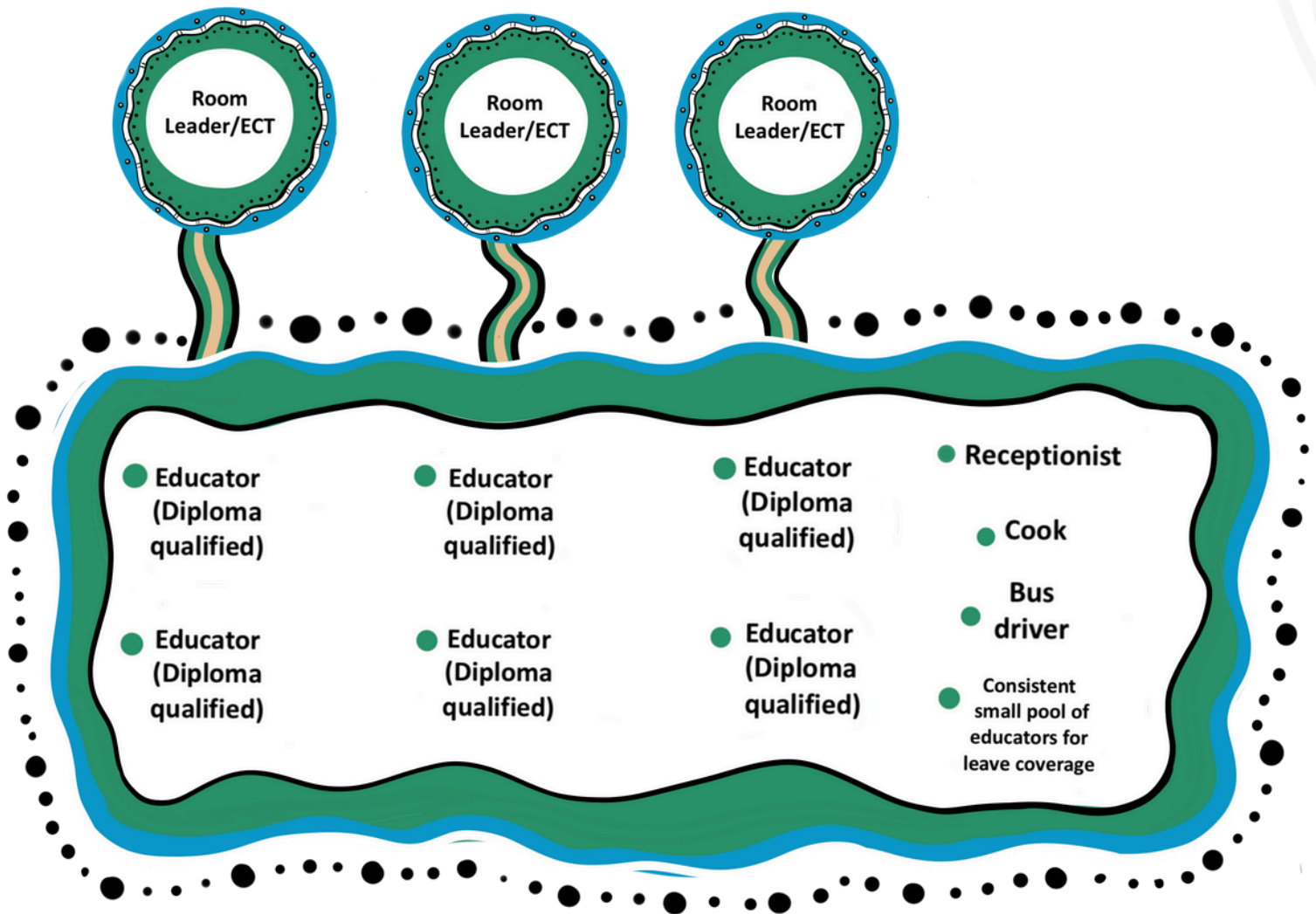
Home visits conducted by the child development consultant and primary educator have also been included as an option within the Boori Milumba model. These would occur between 9am to 2pm in order to support staff availability in the afternoon when they have dedicated non-contact time.

While not part of the multidisciplinary leadership team for the Boori Milumba model, the CEO of the centre and the Early Childhood Project Officer for the co-development project have played and will continue to play significant roles in leading and supporting the Boori Milumba model over the next three years. The Early Childhood Project Officer role will transition to the position of Early Years Manager.

7.2.2 Staffing

Each room will have an early childhood teacher as the room leader. They will be supported by two educators who are Diploma-qualified.

Figure 4: Overview of staff in addition to the leadership team



A full-time receptionist role is required for reception duties in the centre and for providing administrative support to the leadership team. The role also provides a consistent welcoming presence and can assist with transitions by children and families entering and departing the centre.

The cook is a full-time role to support time for cooking, opportunities to connect with the visiting dietician, and adequate time to plan for and facilitate cooking experiences with children and their families and carers.



7.2.3 Primary educator approach

Research indicates that when young children are living with significant hardship and social disadvantage and risk factors, they require close access to their primary educator to support their sense of safety and security in a new environment. In the Boori Milumba model, each educator is a primary educator for three children. The primary educator model provides children with security to develop relationships with peers and other educators while supporting them to confidently explore centre environments (Wilson-Ali, Barratt-Pugh, and Knaus, 2019). This model element also helps families or carers who may find it overwhelming to engage with a large staff team. The primary educator is both the child's and the family's 'go to person,' a trusted person who provides reliable, thoughtful and individualised responses to any questions or concerns raised by the family. The primary educator is part of a hierarchy of attachments available to the child, supplementing not replacing the child's relationship with their family. Over time, the primary educator encourages children to form secondary attachments with other staff in the room and in other rooms.

7.2.4 Professional development

Figure 5: Opportunities for professional development



Teachers and educators receive two hours of non-contact time daily for program planning and/or professional development to enhance professional practice. As the Children’s Services Award 2010 and Teachers Award outline the mandatory provision of two hours per week for non-contact time for staff responsible for the development of a program for children, the model is consistent with and exceeds Australian National Quality Framework (NQF, 2018b) regulations and the NQS (ACECQA, 2018a). The provision of cultural and reflective supervision is an ongoing professional development practice that supports staff wellbeing and quality improvements in the planning, delivery and evaluation of children’s programs.

Teachers and educators will also engage in relevant and ongoing professional development related to the model’s key elements, enhancing their individual professional growth and in response to the identified needs of children and the wider team.

7.2.5 Staff meetings

The leadership team will have a brief catch up meeting each morning. This provides the opportunity to respond to operational matters (e.g. an educator absent on sick leave) and any issues or sharing of relevant information pertaining to specific children and their families or carers. Staff meetings are held monthly, and the duration is 1.5 hours, with all staff attending during work hours.

7.2.6 Reflective and Cultural Supervision for staff

Within the Boori Milumba model, teachers and educators will receive individual, formal and scheduled reflective supervision from an appropriately qualified member of the leadership team on a fortnightly basis. Regular reflective supervision is designed to ensure that the social and emotional wellbeing of staff is supported. Specifically, staff are professionally supported to share, process and unpack their experiences and interactions with children, as part of their own self-care and commitment to continuous improvement (Susman-Stillman, Lim, Meuwissen and Watson, 2020). Additionally, reflective supervision also supports skill development through opportunities for refining and articulating reflective practice and provides access to supportive professional relationships.

The Cultural Leader will provide monthly one on one cultural supervision sessions for all team members. As outlined by Stewart (2013), cultural supervision sessions provide the opportunity for:

- Identifying cultural relevant resources and practices that best meet community aspirations and needs.
- Mentoring and guidance – a dedicated staff member to answer culturally based questions and provide contextually and culturally appropriate information.
- Respecting and embedding Aboriginal cultural across everyday practices, actions and decision making.
- Navigating cultural and community expectations, complexities and challenges.
- Recognising the application of the Cultural Framework and celebrating the work undertaken with children, families, carers and community, leading to their experience of improved outcomes.

The need for additional and informal debriefing when required is also recognised and supported by the presence of the leadership team members who are available for informal conversations with staff members and who can spend time in the rooms coaching staff or providing practical guidance or support.

7.2.7 Infant mental health consultations for each room

Fortnightly, regular, scheduled infant mental health consultations occur for each room team with the Infant Mental Health Consultant. This provides opportunity to reflect on and discuss individual children's needs, and any challenges in the relationships between children and educators, and educators and family members/carers, and the dynamics between team members and groups of children. The purpose of the consults is to provide a space to reflect on these issues and specialist guidance to facilitate a thoughtful, child focused response to particular issues or concerns raised by staff about individual children or small groups of children. There is a particular focus on emotional, social and behavioural issues for children which may be impeding their learning. The consultations may identify ways to minimise the impact of transitions (e.g. orientation of a new child).



7.3 Partnerships with families and carers

This element is both a continuation and an expansion on the previous wraparound support model where numerous family and health supports are available for families and carers within the centre. This extends to children's health and hearing checks, family and child case management support, baby health checks and speech and occupational therapy. The inclusion of an Infant Mental Health Consultant, Early Childhood Development Leader, Cultural Leader and Family Practitioner ensures there is depth and breadth of child and family support which is more targeted, specialised and responsive to each child and family.

Partnerships with families and carers in the Boori Milumba model are based on respectful, responsive and reciprocal relationships and interactions and are underpinned by an 'ethics of care' approach (Tronto, 1993). This is reflected in:

- Establishing trusting relationships with every family/carer and child from first encounters which are sustained throughout the family and child's participation in the program.
- Teachers and educators listening carefully and with respect to understand a family or carer's aspirations, concerns and expectations.
- Working with families or carers in setting shared learning goals for children.
- A multidisciplinary approach to working in culturally safe and responsive ways with every family or carer.
- Non-judgemental, kind and supportive interactions with families and carers by every staff member.

Families and teachers and educators have equally important and sometimes different knowledge and understanding about children, which they share in daily interactions and in the family yarning sessions (goal setting and review meetings) held every 12 weeks. This partnership approach reflects Early Childhood Australia's (ECA) Code of Ethics (2019) commitments to listening to and learning with families and engaging with them in shared decision-making; commitments to shared planning and assessment in relation to their child/ren's learning, development and wellbeing. By encouraging families or carers to share their stories, hopes and deep insights about their children, Boori Milumba staff empower and support families or carers to believe in themselves as their children's first and most enduring educator.

Use of the cultural plans by the Cultural Leader and educators alongside families and carers, demonstrates responsiveness to the uniqueness of each family or carer, their individual circumstances, and their culture in relation to language, beliefs and kinship systems (ECA, 2016).

7.4 Pedagogy and curriculum

Pedagogy and curriculum are pivotal for achieving shared goals for children participating in the Boori Milumba model. The model draws inspiration from the National EYLF (V2.0, AGDE, 2022) and its commitment to “ensuring all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years” (p.4).

Key aspects of pedagogy and curriculum in the model include:

- Embedding local Aboriginal traditions, stories and language into learning experiences in the centre and on Country.
- Individualised cultural and learning plans developed in collaboration with families or carers.
- Differentiating programs in response to identified individual interests, abilities and strengths.
- A focus on relationships and attachment as a secure foundation for children’s learning, development and wellbeing with skilled, attuned, responsive and caring staff.
- Play based learning designed to support infants and toddlers developing sense of identity, their curiosity and deep interest in the people, places and things they encounter each day.
- Using a planning cycle that embeds reflective practice in each stage of the cycle (observe, analyse, plan, implement, evaluate).
- Incorporating multidisciplinary insights from the leadership team in order to enhance the pedagogy and curriculum and to ensure meaningful inclusion for every child.

Pedagogy and curriculum in the Boori Milumba model is not prescriptive or rigidly controlled, instead it respects the professional skills and experience of the teachers and educators and their capacity for recognising and responding to individual and groups of children’s culture, learning, development and wellbeing. Teachers’ and educators’ understanding and respect for community contexts also informs curriculum and pedagogical decisions. Their work is supported and guided especially by the full-time Pedagogical Leader whose role is focused on providing coaching, mentorship, modelling and capacity building for the teachers and educators.

7.5 Orientation and transitions

In the Boori Milumba model, each child has a developmentally informed and culturally responsive, gradual orientation to their participation in the model. After obtaining consent from a family member or carer to participate in the research and the model, the leadership team meet to plan for each child's orientation into the centre. During that meeting, the leadership team will allocate a primary educator for the child and schedule play and yarn dates for the child's orientation. The orientation process has been designed to facilitate the development of the child's relationship with their allocated primary educator as a secure base before they commence the process of separation from their family or carer for daily attendance.

The orientation component of the model is known as 'Play and Yarn'. The intention is for Play and Yarn to occur daily over five consecutive days. The first Play and Yarn session with the child's primary educator and the Infant Mental Health Consultant will provide an opportunity for parents and carers to share what they think is important for the staff team to know about their child. The yarning with the family or carer can potentially cover topics such as the child's previous experience of formal child care and any difficulties with participation in the past; concerns about emotional or behavioural regulation issues; history of attachment relationships and separations or disruptions to family relationships experienced by the child; child's usual ways of coping with and communicating stress and distress.

The timing of the Play and Yarn visits will be of varying duration, with the aim to provide:

- A relaxed experience which encourages both child and family member or carer to feel comfortable within the centre and to commence building trusting relationships with program staff.
- Support the child to build a relationship with their primary educator while supporting the family member or carer to observe their child in the new setting as well as building relationships with the Infant Mental Health Consultant and other staff.
- The opportunity to introduce short separations (initially minutes then gradually increased) which are titrated in relation to the child's reactions to the separations (ability and level of comfort) to explore the environment and participate in learning opportunities when the family member or carer is not present and capacity to use primary educator for comfort.

Characteristics such as the age of the child, their attachment history and needs and the dynamics of the family member or carer to child relationship are unique and are taken into consideration with the play and yarn process taking longer if needed.

The Play and Yarn sessions have been designed to provide a soft, individualised entry into the centre, which reflects:

- Sensitivities for children regarding being around new adults.
- Empowerment for the family or carer as they choose the duration of the Play and Yarn sessions and when they would like to meet specific members of the leadership team, such as the Cultural Leader and Family Practitioner. A slow and unhurried process that prioritises building relationships and ensures cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Transitions within and beyond the program are informed by attachment, educational theory and culturally responsive practices. This is reflected in a member of the leadership team being in the centre foyer to support children and families in daily transitions into the centre.

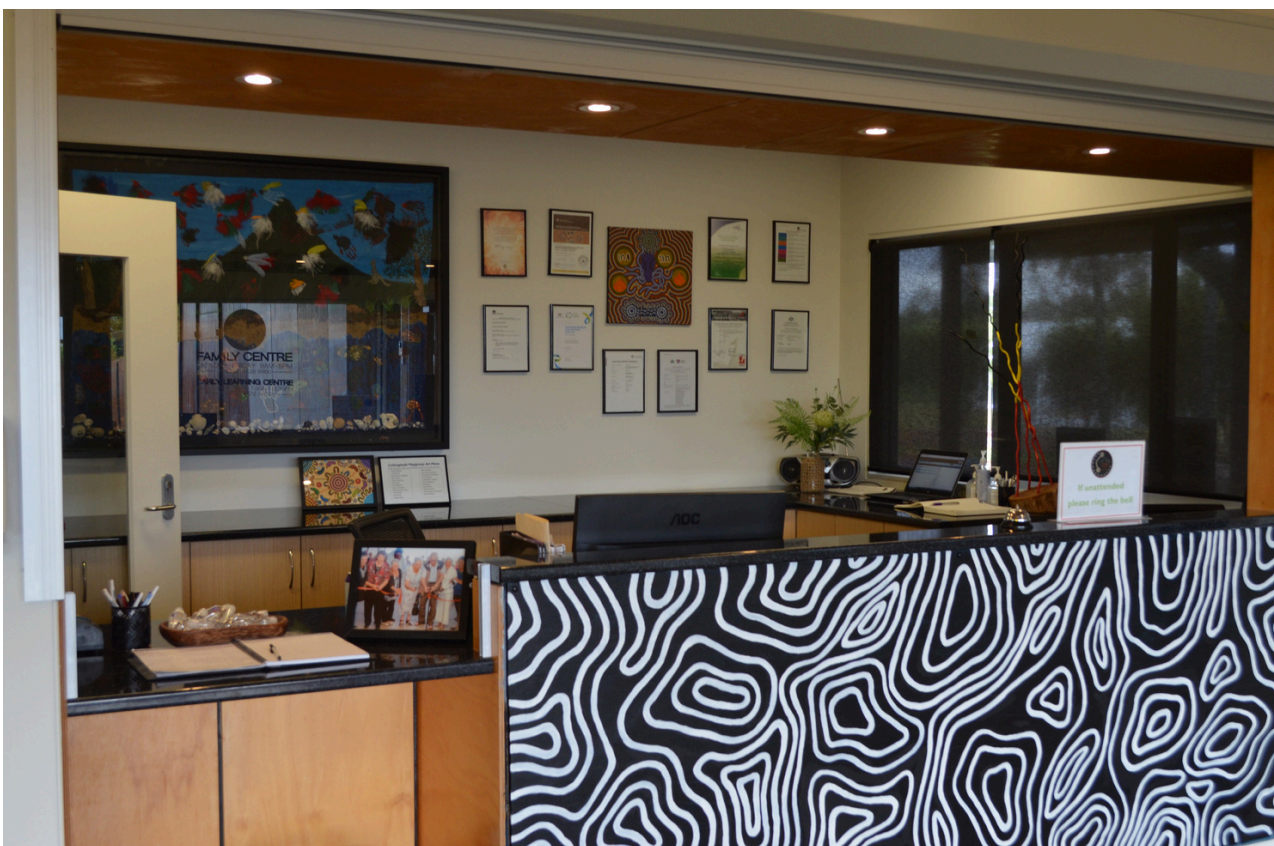
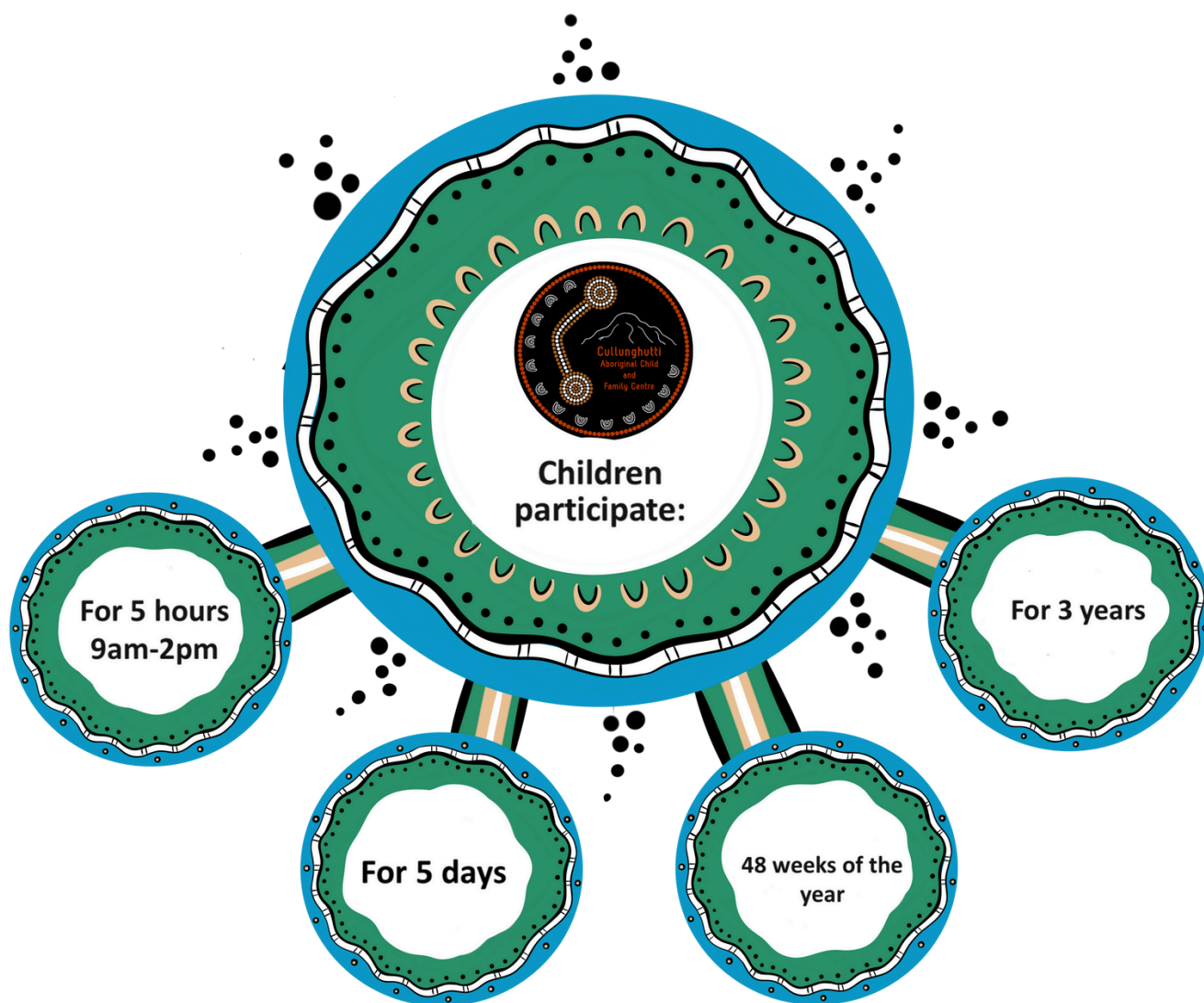


Image: Reception desk within foyer area where a staff member will be available to greet children and families entering and departing the centre.

7.5.1 Participation

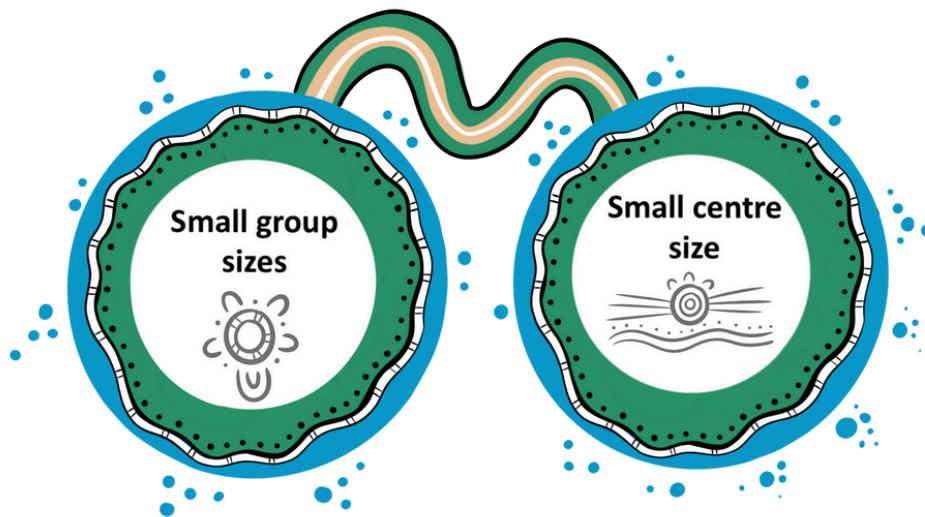
Figure 6: Children's participation within the Boori Milumba program



Children's participation in the program is for five hours each day. There is limited evidence on the ideal threshold for dosage (hours per week/day) and duration (number of years) of participation in ECEC and the available evidence is contradictory. For example, long hours can be harmful, but this depends on contextual factors such as the quality of the ECEC and the quality of the care available at home. Five hours per day was chosen based on the concern that long days are challenging for children aged under three years of age and with the aim to send children home feeling rested, well fed, and happy with time left in the day for children and their families to have enjoyable time together before the demands of evening routines. This worked well in the EYEP and this dose also allows for the staff to have two hours each day for the activities that support the planning and implementation of individualised and high quality care and education.

7.5.2 Group sizes and small centre size

Figure 7: Interconnectivity of small group size and small centre size



The model also includes the structural quality elements of small group size (no more than 15) within a small sized centre and improved ratios of educators to children. There are higher staff to child ratios than the national regulations. These are:

- One educator to three children for the birth to three years age group. Within the Education and Care Services National Regulations (NSW Government, 2011), the ratio is one educator to four children for the birth to two age group and one educator to five children for the two to three age group.
- One educator to five children aged over three years. Within the Education and Care Services National Regulations (NSW Government, 2011), the ratio is one educator to ten children.

Such features are designed to increase the quality and responsiveness of educator to child interactions throughout the day, support group dynamics and minimise children's feelings of stress (Dalgaard et al., 2022). Young children thrive in ECEC settings where attuned, caring and skilled educators provide individualised and responsive interactions and communications. High ratios of qualified, experienced and skilled teachers and educators who are attuned and available emotionally to children, promotes social, emotional and cognitive development (Shirvanian and Michael, 2017).

The maximum group size for each room relates to an understanding of how group size can impact on children's learning outcomes and in recognising the bi-directional influence of stress and wellbeing between educators and children (McQuail, Mooney, Cameron, Candappa, Moss, and Petrie, 2003; Wertfein, Spies-Kofler and Becker-Stoll 2009; Stein, Garay and Nyguen, 2022).

7.6 Environments and resources

7.6.1 Renovations and extensions

As described by Carter and Curtis (2003), 'environments reflect values and shape identity' (p.13). The Boori Milumba model values children's right to access culturally safe, responsive, inviting and stimulating spaces to enhance their learning, development wellbeing and identity. The ability of the centre's environments to positively shape children's identity is recognised through thoughtful planning, provocations for play, and by access to resources and responsive relationships that honour whole child development and learning.

The Boori Milumba model includes:

- Indoor and outdoor spaces beyond the minimum requirements of the national regulations.
- The maximum number of children for program enrolment is between 36 to 42. This enhances the provision of a positive, calm, social setting within the environment.
- Dedicated staff spaces which include offices for the leadership team staff.
- Safe car parking for families.
- Dedicated space for families and carers which support both openness and privacy.
- Welcoming and open foyer area.
- Private and smaller spaces for children and families to access and speak privately with members of the leadership team.



Image: Private spaces available.

Funding was provided for extensions and renovations that were undertaken in the centre to accommodate the Boori Milumba model. This included further enhancing the purposeful design of the centre to create a culturally and physically safe space that is welcoming to all. The modifications aimed to provide a variety of inviting child and family-friendly spaces that support and stimulate children’s learning, development and wellbeing.



Image: Outdoor environment.

7.6.2 Learning environments

Children experience an integrated and nature-based program within the centre and through on Country experiences. The importance of accessing nature-based environments has been linked to children's wellbeing, extended episodes of play, a greater variety of play actions and improved play experiences, increased physical activity and the application of different cognitive skills (Prins, van der Wilt, van der Veen, and Hovinga, 2022).

Opportunities to develop ongoing connections to places of strong cultural significance will be supported through visits on Country and through sharing of stories, language and dance that show importance and power for local Aboriginal people and the places of special significance for them, especially the beautiful Cullunghutti Mountain, which can be viewed from the centre entrance foyer.

7.7 Nutrition

The NQS (ACECQA, 2018a) recognises the importance of nutrition for children's healthy development, capacity for learning and their wellbeing. Given that nearly half (46%) of all children aged from six weeks to 5 years attend an ECEC service anticipate an average of 25 hours per child per week (Australian Government, 2021), it is important for early childhood services to provide a well-balanced, developmentally and culturally appropriate nutrition program for children. Nutritional guideline recommended that at least 50% of the Recommended Dietary Intake (RDI) of nutrients be provided to children during attendance at an ECEC service (Baade, 2022).

The Respect for cultural protocols and practices: Child Safety Practice Manual (Queensland Government, 2023) indicates that in relation to food insecurity there can be 'shame' and stress associated with asking for assistance with food when families are faced with food insecurity issues. This stress and stigma can result in psychological and physical health concerns and problems (Waite, Gallo, Walks, Mikola, and Cutler, 2022).

The Boori Millumba model is culturally sensitive and responsive to the importance of embedding a high-quality nutrition program for the children in the centre by offering up to 75% of the children's required daily nutritional needs. The nutrition aspect of the model also recognises the evidence that meals and snack routines can positively influence children's food behaviours as well as supporting enjoyable social interactions with staff and peers (Willemsen, Wiggins, and Cromdal, 2023).

Mealtimes in the centre focus on supporting children's self-help skills and independence with eating and drinking and provide ongoing opportunities about how to participate in mealtimes with people outside the child's family. Teachers and educators play a key role in modelling positive behaviours and social interactions to support each child's learning and development around food behaviours and mealtimes (Gubbels, Mathisen, Samdal, Lobstein, Kohl, Leversen, Lakerveld, Kremers, and van Assema, 2015).


Collaborative approaches to the nutrition program between the cook, staff, children and families regarding meal planning, presentation and cooking experiences with children are also a focus in the model. These intentionally and thoughtfully designed policies and practices are central to the service's commitment to best practice under Quality area two: Children's Health and Safety in the NQS (2018a) and EYLF Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing (V.20, AGDE, 2022).

7.8 Transport

Research has identified the negative impact of transport disadvantage on participation and retention rates within ECEC services. This includes factors such as limited local transport options, reduced access to private transport, related maintenance costs, and challenges in acquiring the necessary number of child seats (Kellard and Paddon, 2016). Additionally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and families with young children often experience transport disadvantage (AIFS, 2011).

In response, to the data the centre has integrated transportation, as a crucial component of its existing program, recognising its significance in facilitating children's access and participate within the Boori Milumba model.

A new aspect of the transport element is incorporating intentional teaching as part of the children's learning and cultural program while on the bus. Children will experience learning regarding culturally significant places in the local area in addition to concepts of direction, space and place while building on their geographical understandings of the local community. Such experiences also connect to and strengthen the enactment of each child's cultural and educational plans.



To enhance learning opportunities, and support children's transitions from home to the centre on the bus, the Pedagogical Leader will complete sensory profiles to create sensory bags. The bags will contain various resources which children can independently access, which respond to their interests and support their sensory needs and settling routines.

ACECQA (2020) advises that transportation forms part of ECEC if the service remains responsible for children during the period of transportation. The bus environment can therefore be considered part of the centre and an environment that provides valuable time for programming and learning. Utilisation of the bus environment as a learning space with inherent learning opportunities ensures the transport element includes more than purely a safety and supervision focus. In relation to the NQS (ACECQA, 2018a), this extends beyond Quality Area two - Children's health and safety and Quality Area Four – Staffing arrangements to also include:

- Quality Area one - Educational program and practice.
- Quality Area three – Physical environments.
- Quality Area five – Relationships with children.
- Quality Area six – Collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

Two bus runs occur each morning and afternoon to maximise access and attendance and to minimise the amount of time children spend on the bus. Lessening time on the bus reflects ethical considerations centred on respect for children's rights and agency (V.20, AGDE, 2022) and honours children's needs for freedom of movement and active play experiences (Clavell, 2024). Respect for children's physical needs also aligns with the Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for The Early Years (birth to five years): An integration of Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour and Sleep (Australian Government, Department of Health, 2017), which recommends in relation to sedentary behaviour:

- Limit children to being restrained to not more than one hour at a time (e.g. car seat).
- Children are encouraged to engage in singing, reading and storytelling by and with educators.

Operationally, this requires the Centre Director and Early Years Project Officer to allocate additional resourcing, including rostering staff, to ensure safe transportation of children. These ensure maintaining educator to child ratios and ensuring at least one staff member with first-aid, asthma and anaphylaxis training is in attendance during transport (ACECQA, 2023).

Drop off and pick up routines also provide the opportunity for educators to speak to family members or carers and vice versa. This supports sharing information about children's learning and routines and supports families to engage with the centre who cannot physically attend the centre.

CONCLUSION

Many discussions focus on ECEC as an investment that is crucial for laying strong foundations. If the foundation is right and laid as early as possible for children, there will be lasting benefits and impacts that act as a protective mechanism for children throughout their lifetime. This investment needs to encompass children's cultural identity, learning, development, health and wellbeing. Evidence from SNAICC (2019a) indicates that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living with significant family stress and social hardship, current investment in ECEC is not providing the targeted interventions and supports that are required. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities continue to experience personal, economic and social costs of education and health systems that are not adequately addressing their needs. Gaps with access, participation and cultural responsiveness and cultural safety continue to be an issue, which does not support or redress Closing the Gap outcomes and targets (Australian Government, 2020). Lifelong issues that stem from this early experience of inequality will persist for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2020).

Data published from the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (2019), indicates that Australia is not meeting its human rights obligations, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in relation to the five Quality of Life rights (the right to food, education, health, housing and work). The importance of upholding the rights of the child is reinforced within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), specifically:

- Article Three, Article Four, Article Six, Article 26, Article 27 and Article 39.



This is also affirmed, reaffirmed and recognised within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), specifically: Article 14.1 and 14.2, Article 21.1 and 21.2, and Article 24.1.

The co-development of the Boori Milumba model resulted in the design of a program, with key elements that are usually unavailable in universal settings, in order to provide culturally responsive and high-quality prevention and intervention practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Importantly, the Boori Milumba model recognises the strengths that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring to their learning when they are connected to their culture and community. The Boori Milumba model is culturally safe and responsive, child focused and informed by the National EYLF (V2.0, AGDE, 2022). When children experience learning, development and wellbeing that is responsive to their lives, personal experience and their family and community context, they feel a strong sense of belonging and agency as active participants within their community.

Universal ECEC settings under current funding and governance arrangements in Australia continue to struggle with meeting the highly complex needs of children and families enrolled in the Boori Milumba program. Research is therefore important for the implementation of policies and early education and care practices that are evidence informed, accessible and relevant for all children, families and communities (Wilson, Yelland, and Iorio, 2021). Our aim with the design, implementation and evaluation of the Boori Milumba model, is to provide a research informed model that is ACCO and community led, and which supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to shine now and well into their future.



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