

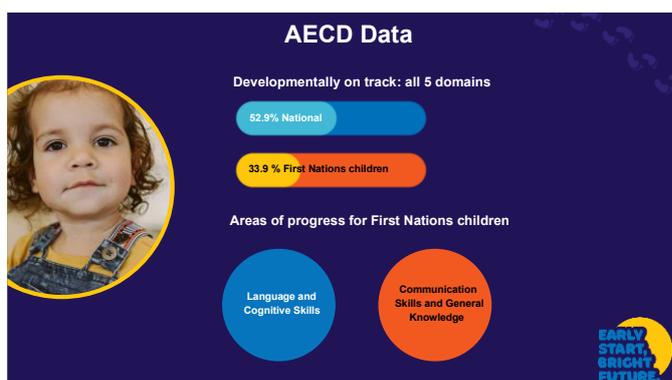
Walking Together: Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in Early Learning

Centre for Excellence in
Child and Family Welfare



Webinar Summary

[View the webinar recording here](#)



The Australian Early Childhood Development Census (AECD) is completed every three years for children in their first year of school. Census results from the 2024 collection were released earlier this year. The 2024 census shows a slight decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

children who are developmentally on track across all five domains—from 34.3% in 2021 to 33.9% in 2024. While this change has been described as relatively stable when compared with the general population data, it’s a figure we must continue to monitor closely as we look ahead to the 2027 census. Nationally, 52.9% of all children were reported to be on track in all five domains—a decline of just under 2% since 2021.

Encouragingly, the data also shows that First Nations children made gains in two key developmental areas: Language and Cognitive Skills and Communication and General Knowledge. These improvements stand in contrast to national trends, which saw declines in these domains. This progress reflects the impact of targeted initiatives under Closing the Gap and the dedicated efforts of communities and services working to support First Nations children. However, as the broader data suggests, there is still significant work ahead to truly close the gap.

Common barriers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families face when accessing Early learning opportunities:

- Limited availability of Aboriginal community-controlled early learning services, and ongoing uncertainty around funding for these services.
- Difficulty accessing high-quality, culturally safe services, which can impact trust and engagement.
- Historical trauma and a legacy of distrust in mainstream service systems, which continues to affect participation.
- Practical challenges, such as transport and other costs associated with regular attendance.
- Complexity in navigating enrolment processes and understanding available subsidies, which can be overwhelming for families.
- Differences in health and developmental opportunities, which may affect readiness for early learning opportunities
- Experiences of racism and stereotyping, which can create unsafe or unwelcoming environments.
- Different cultural understandings of child-rearing and learning practices, which may not be reflected or respected in mainstream settings.

There are a number of programs and supports available—both in Victoria and nationally—that are working to improve access and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These include:

- [Koorie Kids Shine](#) – promoting the value of early learning for Koorie children.
- [Early Start Kindergarten](#).
- [Pre-Prep \(Priority Cohorts\)](#) – commencing in 2026
- [Bupup Balak Wayipungang](#)
- [Koorie Education Support Officers \(KESOs\)](#)
- [BALERT GERRBIK: Koorie Families as First Educators \(KFFE\)](#)
- [Early Childhood LOOKOUT](#)
- [Best Start Facilitators](#)
- [National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#) – driving systemic reform across key [outcome](#) areas.
- [Indigenous Advancement Strategy](#) – supporting targeted investment in early childhood programs.
- [Intensive ECEC model trial](#) – exploring new approaches to engagement and support.
- [Activity test exemptions](#) – helping families access subsidised early learning without meeting work or study requirements.

Our Panellists

Alicia Hansen- A proud Noongar woman with strong family ties to the Wadawurrung people through her partner and children. She has dedicated over 20 years to the early childhood education sector and has been in the Indigenous Preschool Advancement Strategy (IPAS) for the past 10 years.

The IPAS program is a Commonwealth Government initiative delivered by the Eureka Community Kindergarten Association (ECKA- based in Ballarat), supporting 87 not-for-profit kindergartens across the Grampians region of Victoria. Alicia's role within IPAS has been instrumental in strengthening cultural awareness, inclusion, and educational equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Alicia is deeply committed to the belief that all children have the right to a high-quality, inclusive education—one that fosters their curiosity, growth, and identity. She advocates for cultural learning to be shared in respectful, meaningful ways that engage both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Through her work, Alicia continues to promote culturally safe environments where every child is empowered to thrive and where cultural knowledge is celebrated and respected.

Sarah Diplock- Sarah worked at VACCA for 20 years in several roles and has been in her current role for 4 years. As the Senior Education Project Officer for the Partnering Agreements Sarah provides support to VACCA case managers and carers to navigate the education systems from early years to post school. This involves secondary consults with case managers, carers and schools, developing tools and resources to empower knowledge and advocacy, as well as ensuring staff and carers are aware of the Partnering Agreements (early years and school), and the obligations of schools, ACCO's and Child Protection in this space. Sarah works closely with LOOKOUT across the 4 regions as well as with The Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare who are partner agencies in the same project.

Melanie Ashman- Melanie is a proud Aboriginal woman who has worked at VACCA for 7 years. During this time, she completed a 15-month secondment with the Department of Education in a Koorie Engagement Support Officer role which has informed her work within the Education space at VACCA.

Melanie has led Education programs at VACCA for the past 4 years. Currently as the acting Senior Manager of the Statewide Education team, leading VACCA's Education team as they continue to implement their organisation wide Education Strategy and support education programs and projects across VACCA. Melanie is passionate about improving systems and services to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Melanie tirelessly works towards capacity building in areas of cultural understanding and trauma informed practices of schools and services, ensuring that schools and services are accountable for the responsibility they have to children and young people.

Key Messages from the panel discussion

How would you define cultural safety in the context of early childhood education or the Child and Family support space?

- Cultural safety in early education goes far beyond displaying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag and acknowledgement plaques. It's about having the cultural resources available within the learning environment.
- Cultural safety is embedded within the relationships that we build and with the respect through thoughtful conversations we have with families, particularly those first interactions with families.
- It's important to acknowledge that not all families are aware of their cultural heritage and may or may not have connections to their mob. Sensitivity is crucial. Using respectful and inclusive language gives the families the autonomy to share information at their own pace at their comfort level.
- A place people can feel pride in their culture.
- VACCA have developed a cultural therapeutic ways framework, there are three pillars in the framework that guide our practice: **culture**, **trauma-informed** and **self-determination** theories and practice.
- Knowing and understanding the impact of colonisation and the intergenerational trauma that a lot of First Nations families might have experienced and acknowledging that their own experiences of education spaces might not have been positive.

What are some of the risks for children, in terms of being able to engage with education when cultural safety is not present?

- A negative experience in their early years for both the child or their parents and carers, shapes how they view their education journey going forward.
- Disengagement and not building and potentially missing out on fostering a love of learning.
- Families may be hesitant to bring and leave their child at a service, based on their previous experiences of trauma (e.g. Stolen Generation, forced removal of children) and distrust for services. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have different child rearing and teaching practices, so there may be uncertainty for families that they are doing the right thing. It's important to create and build trusting relationships with families to be able to explore these feelings and concerns.
- Being flexible and understanding that some families will face barriers to attendance and welcoming families when they arrive at the service rather than being fixed on set arrival times is important.
- In offering families additional support, the approach is important, if families feel singled out, they are more likely to refuse support even if they need it.

Can you share an example of a culturally safe practice or an environment change that made a meaningful difference for a child or family?

- Making a deliberate effort to capture the voices of parent/carers and the voice of the child in terms of their aspirations and goals, but also in understanding their perspectives on certain issues, has been effective building a partnership between education and home.
- Communicating positive achievements and progress to families, not just negative information.
- Understanding the families' preferences in terms of communication is also important so that you can approach them in a way that meets the families needs.
- Being flexible and open to change, if things aren't working.
- Seeking support from local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, Koorie Education Support Officers (KESO), or LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisor (ECLA) can be helpful in developing new approaches to working with families in early learning.
- Inviting families to participate in an activity such as cooking a meal
- or participating in a session or if they would like to share some information about their culture.
- Utilising the team around the learner- such as family, and other professionals involved to develop a greater understanding of the learner, previous supports

and strategies, and goals of the child are important and working together to support the family.

This [reflective practice for care teams resource](#) may help in developing a strong and collaborative partnership across all professionals working with the child.

Where can practitioners find more information, particularly where they don't have a local ACCO?

- VAEAI website: [VAEAI – Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.](#)
- Asking respectful but curious questions that invite the sharing of cultural knowledge and heritage.
- Koorie Curriculum website: [Koorie Curriculum](#)
- Contact your local KESO who can support with a cultural audit tool.
- Organisations Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)
- Marrung Strategy: [Marrung | vic.gov.au](#)
- The Darebin Best Start Aboriginal Reference Group have worked together to develop a video series for mob by mob, known as "Nugal Murrup Buladu – belong, spirit, grow". <https://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/Community-and-pets/Children-and-families/Best-Start>
- Other Koorie run playgroups or early learning centres
- Aboriginal Best Start Facilitators
- Additional resources from VACCA are attached to the summary email.

If you attended the session or watched the recording, we love to hear your feedback by completing this brief feedback survey: <https://forms.office.com/r/VXkx1Nu7Je>

You can find additional resources and information about Early Years at:

<https://www.earlyyearshub.com.au/>

Stay up to date with future events by subscribing to the Early Start, Bright Future Newsletter: [Early Start, Bright Future Newsletter - Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare](#)

Reach out to us directly: earlyyears@cfecfw.org.au