

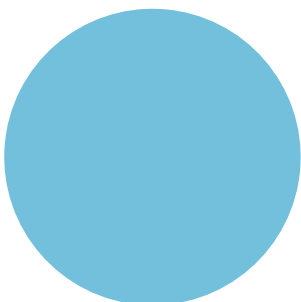
Harnessing Hubs to Realise the Vision of Thriving Kids

Thriving Kids presents a powerful opportunity to improve equitable outcomes for children with additional health and development needs and build a future where every child has the chance to thrive. Thriving Kids can catalyse system-wide change by strengthening universal services to better support children, driving a more connected and locally responsive service system and enabling parents and carers to understand and act on best practice early intervention.

The national network of Child and Family Hubs can play a key role in achieving this vision and serve as a local service delivery mechanism for Thriving Kids.

Currently, 12.5% children begin school developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, the highest since the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) began in 2009.¹ This figure rises to 20.3% for children living in the most disadvantaged areas and 26.5% for First Nations children.² For children with a language background other than English, these numbers have increased from 13.1% in 2021 to 14.7% in 2024.³ These figures underscore the need for Thriving Kids to deliver an equitable, culturally responsive and integrated approach, embedded where children live, learn and play.

The alignment of Thriving Kids with a wide range of national reforms, creates an unprecedented opportunity to deliver lasting change. Taking a holistic, coordinated approach offers a pathway to a more inclusive and effective early childhood development service system, which gives every child the chance to thrive.



Child and Family Hubs: A local platform for integrated support

Child and Family Hubs (Hubs) are uniquely positioned to support the delivery of Thriving Kids. Hubs empower parents to support their children, facilitate early identification of developmental needs, and coordinate seamless transitions through tiered supports including universal and specialist early childhood intervention services.

Hubs are trusted and non-stigmatising 'front doors' in their local community and offer multiple access points such as through early years services, primary school sites, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations integrated early childhood and health services (ACCOs), primary care or virtual platforms. While tailored to reflect local needs and contexts, all Hubs share a commitment to integrated, high-quality, care for children and families in welcoming, inclusive environments. They are particularly effective at improving service equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and families experiencing intersecting challenges such as socioeconomic disadvantage, cultural and/or linguistic diversity, and geographic isolation, by addressing systemic and structural barriers and promoting inclusive service delivery.

There is growing evidence demonstrating that Hubs can support early identification of developmental vulnerability, increase service uptake, and improve coordination, leading to better child health and education outcomes including for First Nations children and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.^{4, 5, 6, 7} With over 470 Hubs nationwide, supported by the National Child and Family Hubs Network (Network),ⁱ this extensive social infrastructure offers a strategic platform for locally tailored, place-based solutions aligned with state and territory systems. To fully realise their potential, adequate, fit-for-purpose and sustained investment is essential, particularly in the integration 'glue' that enables coordinated service delivery, workforce support, and family engagement.

Unlocking the full potential of physical and virtual Hubs can help achieve the vision for Thriving Kids. This brief outlines six key recommendations to leverage and strengthen the role of Hubs as local delivery platforms and invest in the key enablers that support integrated, inclusive, and responsive service systems.

- 1. Leverage existing Hubs, including ACCO integrated early years services, to deliver local solutions, co-designed with children, families and communities**
- 2. Provide sustainable investment in the glueⁱⁱ to enable integrated, multidisciplinary support**
- 3. Empower families with evidence-based information and community connections**
- 4. Strengthen universal services to meet children's developmental needs in everyday settings, and offer seamless pathways to additional support where needed**
- 5. Use data to drive quality, equity, and impact, inclusive of Indigenous data sovereignty principles**
- 6. Align investment to build a connected early childhood development service system**

i The Network brings together service providers, community organisations, advocates, researchers, policymakers, and leaders across Australia. Together, we aim to build capacity, reduce fragmentation, and identify best practice to strengthen and scale integrated Child and Family Hubs nationwide.

ii The 'glue' is the people, systems, relationships, and structures that enable integrated service delivery.

The Hive's Family Story of Connection and Collaboration

A single mother with one child at the time of referral was introduced to a Hive linker (a person who supports children and families to navigate complex health, education, and support systems) through another First Nations Collective Partner. This soft entry point was crucial as it allowed the family to engage in a comfortable, culturally safe way, supported by someone they already trusted. Over several meetings, the linker gradually built a strong and respectful relationship with the mother.

As trust grew, the mother shared her concerns about her child's development and her wish to enrol her in preschool. The linker provided information about early childhood education and care (ECEC) options and, respecting the family's preference, organised a visit to the local preschool attended by other family members known to her. The child was quickly enrolled and began attending.

Once the child settled into the preschool, educators with the support of in-house allied health (speech and occupational therapy) support, were able to observe and identify developmental and behavioural concerns, prompting further assessment. As this approach was not a 1 to 1 support, the preschool then circled back to The Hive for navigation support and some brokerage to start the process. This collaborative approach enabled early identification of additional health and developmental needs. The linker, acting as a 'glue,' coordinated with the preschool and the mother to access a paediatrician and follow through with recommendations, including completing an National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) access request, and connecting to local allied health supports for 1 on1 clinical base speech and occupational therapy.

This integrated, wrap-around support not only benefited the child but also strengthened the capacity of ECEC staff through shared learning and upskilling in supporting children with additional needs. Through these collective efforts between community organisations, The Hive, and the ECEC service, the child gained access to quality early education and targeted early childhood intervention, helping ensure that he will be ready to thrive in primary school.

Reference: The Hive Mt Druitt 2770, NSW, 2025.

While Hubs can play a critical role in realising the vision for Thriving Kids, they must be complemented by broader system reforms to ensure all children and families receive the right support, at the right time, in the right place.

1. Leverage existing Hubs to deliver local solutions, co-designed with children, families and communities

With over 470 Hubs nationwide, supported by the National Child and Family Hubs Network, Hubs provide an established platform to deliver locally responsive and integrated supports. Hubs can be strategically positioned as the cornerstone of a place-based support system that enables prevention, early intervention, and more equitable outcomes. Thriving Kids can enable this place-based approach, by providing a national framework for Hubs with clear guidelines that ensure consistency, quality, tiered and integrated pathways of services and supports.

Genuine co-design is essential not only for Hubs but across all elements of Thriving Kids. Children and families are experts in their own experience, and their engagement must be central at every stage of design and implementation.⁸ Shared design with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and peak organisations is essential to government delivering on their commitments to share power and decision-making with those communities, and allow them to exercise self-determination over the early childhood developmental responses that respond to their children's needs. Similarly, insights from other communities historically underserved, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, and those facing geographic and socioeconomic disadvantage are critical. Embedding lived experience and local context into Hub design requires dedicated time and funding to support meaningful engagement.

Ongoing and increased resources to support and grow ACCO led integrated service models are vital. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated early years centres are leading the way in coordinated, wraparound support having long implemented holistic, strengths-based, culturally responsive models which are trusted places in their communities.

2. Provide sustainable investment in the glue to enable integrated, multidisciplinary support

There is growing evidence of the benefits of wraparound, integrated supports for children with additional needs.^{9,10} Hubs are ideally placed to coordinate multiple supports through their holistic, child-and-family-centred approaches and bring multidisciplinary professionals together to enable assessment and early identification of emerging needs. Their integrated approach supports seamless service delivery, ranging from low-intensity allied health and family services to more intensive supports such as the NDIS and Medicare Mental Health Kids Hubs, across services provided within and beyond the Hub.

However, integration does not happen automatically when services are co-located. It requires time, effort, and sustained investment in the 'glue' that underpins coordination and multidisciplinary wrap-around support. The 'glue' refers to the people, systems, relationships, and structures that enable integrated service delivery.¹¹

Relational roles which are funded through the glue, such as peer Key Workers/Navigators, Community Outreach Workers, and Hub Leads, play a vital role in proactive outreach to engage families and build trust, guiding families through the service system, supporting joint planning, and enabling coordinated support. Yet integration goes beyond these visible roles. The glue is multi-dimensional, encompassing cross-sector governance, distributed leadership, coordination systems, relational infrastructure and a shared culture of responsibility, all tailored to local needs through co-design.¹²

Early Childhood Hubs with funded glue can manage and integrate significantly more partnered delivery services, up to 22 times more by dollar value, than those without.¹³ Systematically funding the 'glue' as core infrastructure, for example through flexible 5-10 year funding cycles, can unlock the full potential of Thriving Kids. It would allow Hubs to facilitate integrated and multidisciplinary approaches across education, health and social services and coordinate service delivery within natural settings, such as early childhood or school environments. In doing so, the glue can improve outcomes for children with additional health and development needs, reduce barriers and disruptions for families, and facilitate effective multidisciplinary practice.

3. Empower families with evidence-based information and community connections

Hubs are welcoming places where families feel safe to seek help, access evidence-based information and parenting strategies, and connect with others. These supportive environments foster early engagement and build parenting capability and confidence through access to trusted advice, group programs such as playgroups, and one-on-one support delivered in familiar settings. The existing network of over 470 Hubs can be strategically used to strengthen community connections and empower families with the knowledge and confidence to support their children's wellbeing, advancing the aspiration of Thriving Kids.

eHubs complement physical Hubs by offering low-stigma, high-reach support, especially valuable in areas with limited services, such as rural and remote communities. Families are often overwhelmed by the volume of information available online and are seeking simple solutions to help them solve issues relating to their child's health and wellbeing concerns, including reassurance, practical tips or connections to local services. The Child and Family eHub is a user-friendly, equitable online portal co-designed with families to meet these needs.¹⁴ It provides locally tailored access to evidence-based resources, parenting programs, social connection opportunities, and service links. Built on a replicable digital infrastructure, the eHub leverages trusted platforms like Infoxchange's health directory and the Raising Children Network.

eHubs can provide a pathway to physical Child and Family Hubs for more comprehensive, integrated care. They can also serve as a "hub in your pocket," helping families access support without needing to attend in person or to maintain connections to services and relationships built through place-based Hubs. With national expansion, eHubs can help families navigate support systems for children with additional health and development needs more easily, wherever they are.



4. Strengthen universal services to meet children's developmental needs in everyday settings, and offer seamless pathways to additional support where needed

Thriving Kids presents an opportunity to strengthen universal systems to meet children's developmental needs by embedding proportionate responses in everyday environments. Hubs support this approach by co-locating and coordinating universal and tiered services in welcoming, child and family-centred spaces. Hubs can also facilitate streamlined transitions to additional supports, such as intervention and NDIS services delivered in natural settings for families who need it.

Achieving this goal requires building the capability and capacity of mainstream health and education systems to identify and respond to children's developmental needs and embedding inclusive, evidence-based practices consistent with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. Central to this effort is the development of a national Child Development Capability Framework, outlining the essential skills, knowledge, and competencies professionals need to support children and families. In addition to inclusive practices, the framework should emphasise training in family relational practice, trauma-informed care, culturally responsive approaches, and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children respond best when their services are provided by qualified, skilled and experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals, but Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems do not support the full participation of those communities. To fully maximise the opportunity of Thriving Kids for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Australian governments need to invest urgently in building a multidisciplinary ACCO early years workforce capable of delivering developmental supports to their children.

Hubs can serve as vehicles for local workforce development, enabling multidisciplinary practice and sharing learnings across broader systems. They also provide a community-based platform to support the growth and capability of other workforces, including peer workers. Sustained investment in the glue also enables workforce collaboration and shared professional learning across disciplines.

5. Use data to drive quality, equity, and impact, inclusive of Indigenous data sovereignty principles

Embedding robust data, evaluation and continuous improvement processes for Child and Family Hubs can help build on the existing knowledge base and inform future funding models. This could include harmonised measurements to enable consistent monitoring across Hub sites to drive ongoing quality improvement and evaluate the collective impact of Hubs.

Embedding this data within a broader national data and monitoring framework for Thriving Kids could support system-wide learning, continuous improvement, and reform. Timely access to quality, meaningful data can help assess if Thriving Kids is effectively meeting the needs of children and families and identify any inequities early. It also enables data-driven decision making to strengthen service delivery. Incorporating this framework within local partnerships also supports warm referrals, data sharing, and continuity of care.

There is also a need to build and measure system competency in delivering early childhood developmental assessments and supports in culturally responsive and safe ways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. This includes strengthening and monitoring the cultural responsiveness of mainstream Hubs to ensure services acknowledge and respect Aboriginal families' backgrounds, beliefs, values, customs, knowledge, lifestyles, and social practices.

6. Align investment to build a connected early childhood development service system

Significant reforms and investments are underway across multiple government portfolios, many of which aim to support the same children and families as the Thriving Kids initiative. This policy environment presents a strategic opportunity to converge funding across portfolios to maximise the impact of these investments and deliver improved outcomes for children and families. In particular, the \$1.03b investment in the Building Early Education Fund and \$50m co-investment with the Investment Dialogue for Australia's children, offer a chance to prioritise the establishment of integrated Early Childhood Hubs in areas of greatest need, rather than focusing solely on standalone Early Childhood Education and Care centres.¹⁵

There is an urgent need, amidst this fast-moving policy landscape, to invest in a new, dedicated funding model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander integrated community-controlled early years services – Hubs, by another name – which have excelled for decades in holistic and integrated service approaches to nurturing their children, giving them the developmental and educational supports they need to excel as life-long learners, and strengthening their families.

Hubs also offer a practical vehicle to help deliver on other key reform priorities including the Early Years Strategy, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, universal ECEC reform, placed-based initiatives and the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement. Taking a holistic, coordinated approach offers a pathway to a more inclusive and effective early childhood development system, which gives every child the chance to thrive. Expanding on the existing network of over 470 Hubs would provide integrated support to more children and families.

Successful integration will also require strong partnerships across all levels of government, underpinned by shared purpose, joint accountability, and inclusive governance. There are opportunities to leverage existing initiatives, including but not limited to, the Child and Family Learning Centres in Tasmania, Child and Parent Centres in Western Australia, and integrated Hubs in South Australia. Doing so will enable a coordinated approach to new and existing infrastructure and workforce planning, and ensure implementation aligns with broader system reform occurring across jurisdictions.



About the Network

The National Child and Family Hubs Network is dedicated to strengthening Child and Family Hubs Australia-wide. The Network unites families, service providers, community-based organisations, advocates, researchers, and policymakers to build the capacity of Hubs and ensure children and families can access the supports, services, and connections they need to thrive. The Network is generously supported by The Ian Potter Foundation, Minderoo Foundation, and Paul Ramsay Foundation.

www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

The following organisations endorse this brief.



Background

About Child and Family Hubs

Hubs serve as welcoming, family-centred ‘one-stop shops’, supporting child development, education, and family health and wellbeing. They do this by facilitating equitable, seamless access to a range of education, health and social services; strengthening parental capacity; and fostering community and social connections for families.

Hubs offer multiple access points such as through early years services, primary school sites, primary care services, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, or virtual platforms. While Hubs are tailored to reflect the needs of their local communities, they all share a commitment to integrated, high-quality, care for children and families in welcoming spaces. This is made possible by the ‘glue’, the leadership, coordination, and relationships that enable integration, family engagement and collaboration across services.

For more information on the evidence of Hubs to support children with additional health and development needs, see: [Hubs as a Pivotal Platform to Support the Local Delivery of Thriving Kids](#).

For more information on what is required to build the capability and capacity of health and education as the universal backbone for identify and supporting children and families, see [MCRI Submission to the Inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative](#).

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