



# Children's Ground

Submission to Productivity Commission 'Early Childhood Education and Care'

*"Children's Ground is always there... we've got the little ones coming over all the time. When we have learning here it's a bit different than the other organisations. Because others – like pre-schools, like childcare. Here [at Children's Ground] the mothers and grandmothers are here. When we bring the kids to Children's Ground, the little small ones, we always talk in Arrernte to them, and the white people [non-First Nations staff], they always talk English to them. It's much better if the little ones come here. They learn more... Because I know some of the little kids still speak English all the time, when they go back from that childcare."*

Children's Ground Family/Staff member  
From 2017-19 evaluation of Children's Ground in Central Australia

Submitted: 14 February 2024

Children's Ground commends the Australian Government on undertaking this critically important Productivity Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. We appreciate and are pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this nationally important review.

This Productivity Commission is particularly relevant to Children's Ground because we are working with First Nations children and families who were not engaging in any early childhood education and care. Before Children's Ground, only 14% of children had previously engaged in early childhood education and none were actively and regularly engaged. Children's Ground's approach to early childhood education is engaging children who have never previously engaged, and we feel this is important to share with the Productivity Commission. See Appendix One for information about Children's Ground, and Appendix Two for information about how we are evaluating and evidencing the impact of Children's Ground for children, families and communities.

In the draft report, the Productivity Commission have identified and highlighted high level issues and challenges in relation to First Nations families accessing and engaging in the national early childhood education and care system. However, some key issues have been missed that are important access enablers to engage First Nations children and families in early childhood education.

The two main access enablers missing from the Productivity Commission's draft report are:

1. The establishment of First Nations education systems that operate alongside western early childhood education.
2. Highlighting the absence of a model of early childhood education that is accessible to First Nations (and other) families where parents are not employed, and do not need or want to access, and with prohibitive costs.

Many of the First Nations children and families not accessing the national ECEC system are amongst the most disempowered and the most economically, socially and culturally excluded families in Australia. Yet the national ECEC system continues to expect such children and families to engage in a western ECEC system where many access barriers exist, including transport, language, distance, cost and activity tests. But most importantly First Nations children and families are expected to engage in an ECEC system that is culturally unsafe, where children have to learn in English, rather than their first, second, third (etc) language and where they cannot engage in learning on their country, about their culture, alongside their family, and learning from their Elders and cultural educators.

The First Nations children and families not accessing ECEC are the people making up the damning Closing the Gap statistics, of which most remain off-track with minimal improvement in over a decade of investment.

The national ECEC system was first established as childcare to increase female workforce participation. Over time broadened to also provide early childhood education, encompassing preschool education, and as a key 'school readiness' strategy. Many First Nations children and families have been excluded from employment and ECEC systems for generations. For children and families who have lived with such disempowerment and exclusion, they will not transition from zero to full engagement quickly. Building engagement and moving towards active and regular engagement in ECE and employment requires dedicated and targeted resources, empowerment, education about the importance of child development and time to walk alongside people to achieve each of these. This is the significant gap in ECEC models and funding across Australia.

We recognise the scope of this Productivity Commission, however, we compel the Commission to consider that the national ECEC system is not adequate or appropriate for many First Nations children and families – and recommendations to improve the current system do not go far enough and will continue to perpetuate the disempowerment and exclusion of many First Nations children and families.

Given the life-long impact of high quality and culturally based and safe ECEC for children, Children's Ground's feels there is an urgent need for the Federal and jurisdictional governments to consider models of ECEC that can fill the current gap in ECEC opportunities for the most excluded First Nations children and families. One attempt at this in the Northern Territory has been the Families as First Teachers program. However, this is still a western ECE service.

The right of First Nations children to access education in their first language, about their culture, on their traditional lands and alongside their family and cultural educators has been clearly stated by the United Nations for decades and backed by a growing body of western literature and evidence. Yet governments continue to push First Nations children into western ECE systems that are doing harm to children's cultural identity, learning and life-long social/emotional wellbeing.

This submission briefly presents the importance of First Nations education systems and the current context of the western ECEC system. The recently released M.K. Turner Report: A plan for First Nations-led and designed education reform in Australia is attached as supporting evidence.

*"When the kids go to school [mainstream education], they have to leave their language and culture at the door. But with Children's Ground, we take them out on Country and show them their place. Where they're from and where they're ancestors are from so they know who they are. We've never had a chance like this to teach our kids our own culture... We had to follow someone else's rules first, and now we've got a chance to do what we want.*

L. Gorey (dec.), First Nations Governance Committee and Senior Arrernte Educator  
Ampe Akenhe Ahehle (Children's Ground Central Australia).

## First Nations Knowledge and Education Systems

**Right to Education:** Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Despite these globally recognised rights, in Australia First Nations Education systems are not recognised and First Nations culturally responsive practice and content is not met in mainstream education systems.

First Nations educational systems come from the land, with clear principles of practice, policies, curriculum, roles and responsibilities. Each First Nation across Australia will express this system of education in their own right. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational foundations vary significantly from mainstream Australian curriculum and practice.

Children's Ground is leading First Nations educational reform in Australia. We recognise First Nations educational systems across the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations of Australia. We are implementing a First Nations-led educational approach and advocating for national reform.

Children’s Ground has a 25-year approach developed and designed with, and led by, First Nations people. It is based on the governance, education and health systems within the communities who are implementing the approach.

First Nations education safeguards the responsibility and accountability each child has to their kinship structure, traditional custodianship of land and the foundation for reaching and being successful in their adulthood. The CG System enables children to know and become their identity from birth. It includes the right of children to learn in their first language, on their traditional lands and alongside/from their family and cultural teachers (grandparents). This learning is delivered by First Nations cultural professors and educators. First Cultural education is always intergenerational. It recognises the significance of First Nations culture and connection to family and land and how this birthright is their identity and belonging.

First Nations educational pedagogy and curriculum delivers learning across all key areas of knowledge (sciences, math, technologies, arts, history, languages, business, etc) through a First Nations context. English numeracy and literacy, digital technologies and other global knowledge are considered by families and Children’s Ground as a critical part of the educational journey and for success for children in a post-colonial and global context. English literacy and numeracy do not come at the expense of children’s First Cultural learning in terms of content and approaches.

The CG System privileges first culture and language and focuses on children and the communities where they live. The intergenerational and integrated systems approach aligns with the First Nations world view that connects all key areas for life, learning, development, health, economy and wellbeing. The System is designed to deliver social, political, economic and cultural inclusion, rights and wellbeing.

**Figure 1: Arrernte Learning and Curriculum Framework**



## Mainstream/Western based learning systems

Despite concerted efforts for improved cultural inclusion in the mainstream curriculum, we are a long way from securing culturally responsive practice within our mainstream educational institutions.

Respect for cultural diversity and recognition of rights have improved over the past decade in particular. However, education and content that reflects the culture and identity of the learner is limited and the system is highly focused on Western terms of reference. The exclusion of cultural perspectives is particularly profound for First Nations Australians who experience some of the worst educational outcomes in Australia.

The inclusion of First Nations history, culture and rights within the Australian mainstream curriculum is critically important for children's development, learning, physical health, social/emotional wellbeing and long-term outcomes in all elements of life. Yet the inclusion of First Nations cultural diversity and rights varies in depth and effectiveness across jurisdictions. There are unique examples of communities and projects that are seeking to or have successfully achieved the inclusion of First Peoples' culture and knowledge within their teaching and learning. However, this is far from being embedded as part of educational practice nationally. In the Northern Territory and other parts of the country, where there is high population of First Nations students, most (unless in a remote area) are still required to learn through a foreign teaching and content frame. That foreign curriculum and pedagogy are also derived from a culture that has historic oppressions for First Peoples.

The Australian curriculum is increasingly more focused on inclusion of First Nations Knowledge systems. However, there are few examples of how this has been effectively achieved systemically and sustainably.

A lack of legislation, political commitment, investment, will and overall care for recognition, understanding and acknowledgement of First Nations knowledge systems continue to provide major barriers to education in first language.

Some bilingual education continues to exist in Australian States and Territories however, these have drastically reduced over the last 50 years. Although new curriculum standards in some states and territories have made steps to improve and promote this the result remains minimal.

In mainstream education, children are measured against Western literacy and numeracy standards, yet there are no clear measures that relate to First Nations education knowledge systems and language development. This is largely because First Nations children are not afforded the right to engage in education in their first language as the majority of other Australian children are.

Currently the inclusion of First Nations people, history, culture, language and recognition of their rights to education is limited. There is no legislative instrument that mandates Australia's First Nations input and inclusion in the current mainstream Western education system, let alone a First Nations Education system developed and implemented in first language and about first culture in Australia.

Despite the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and research evidence from institutions such as UNESCO that has long promoted the primary importance of culture in learning and development, in Australia there are no legislative or policy frameworks that reflect First Nations rights to *"establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning."* (UNDRIP, Article 14)

Currently there is no place in Australia where First Nations children can walk into a classroom that privileges their language and culture. Australia has spent 240 years denying First Nations people this

basic human right. First Nations children are often sent into culturally damaging educational environments. These environments do not reflect their identity, language, family, history or knowledge-systems and often they deny and diminish the culture and identity of children. Too often children feel like failures and too many drop out of school. In Australia, First Nations children are often regarded and assessed as being 'inferior learners' and 'at-risk' within the mainstream system and are then subject to deficit and remedial approaches in education. Their ability as learners and their innate preferences for approaches to learning are not respected, understood, nurtured or developed.

The lack of effective and culturally privileged learning content, teachers and environments for First Nations children in Australia has resulted in the health, education and wellbeing of First Nations children being at perpetual high risk. It results in barriers to further training and employment. The current circumstances are completely unacceptable and contravene all standards of rights and protections. Children are living with the racism, exclusion and trauma that results in high levels of child protection removals, imprisonment, education failure, early death, disease, and poor mental health. To allow this to happen is unforgivable – to allow this to continue is unthinkable.

It is the case that for some children, the education experiences both contributes to and reinforces trauma due to systemic racism and exclusion.

Decades of national and international research and reviews have consistently found and articulated core elements of 'evidence-based practice' that are important in achieving consumer-led, holistic service delivery and supports (including education) to achieve sustainable change and impact for children, families and communities experiencing extreme disadvantage. Yet education and other siloed policy, services and programs have not been able to effectively respond to these findings and achieve service systems that provide effectively integrated, community-led services, that are culturally safe and accessible for all. This is evidenced by minimal change in key Closing the Gap targets over eleven years.

### The Children's Ground System – Learning and Wellbeing

Children's Ground exists to evidence systemic change to create generational change with First Nations communities who have experienced the greatest social, economic and cultural exclusion and inequity in all areas of wellbeing: education, health, social, economic and cultural life. The CG System has a 25-year longitudinal evaluation embedded from the outset in each community that is building and contributing to national and international evidence bases.

Children's Ground privileges first cultural knowledge systems and language. First Nations leaders of Children's Ground want future generations to be First Nations children in a global world – strong in their identity and culture and equipped with the skill to enjoy global opportunities. To achieve this, we privilege First Culture however we engage three system of knowledge and practice as seen in the figure below.

	<b>Children's Ground's three systems of knowledge</b>
<b>1</b>	First cultural systems of knowledge and practice (pre-colonisation)
<b>2</b>	Leading practice and pedagogy post-colonisation in relation to first culture – e.g. immersion schooling, bilingual education
<b>3</b>	Western/Global leading practice in education, health, wellbeing, economy and society

The Children's Ground Approach recognises the interconnectedness between learning, health, wellbeing, economy, culture and community – as all interdependent. Our integrated service platform includes five operational areas considered to be core to supporting children and families to be empowered and engage in learning and education from their earliest years. The long-term aims are: educational success, social, cultural and emotional wellbeing and economic independence.

1. **Learning and Wellbeing (education):** starting with a focus on early years learning in first language and English, with First Culture and English/Western learning occurring on country and at an intergenerational community centre. As children grow, learning grows with them to include primary and secondary school education, and post-secondary vocational training.
2. **Family Health and Wellbeing (physical, cultural, social/emotional and environmental health):** incorporating health promotion and prevention, nutrition, social and emotional wellbeing, environmental health, support to access and coordination of clinical health services and traditional healing. Delivery focuses on maternal, child and family health, health literacy and health agency.
3. **Economic Development and Wellbeing (employment, training and enterprise):** developed through a local workforce, a curriculum and learning platform designed for future employment, support for transition to work, micro-financing and enterprise development.
4. **Community Development and Wellbeing (society, governance, culture and environment):** provision of integrated community/family centres where services are delivered. These centres promote and deliver community safety, community governance and the building of social, cultural and economic capital where people live.
5. **Cultural and Creative Development and Wellbeing (embedded across all areas):** embedded in learning, health, employment and community development, cultural knowledge systems and creative thinking are central to the CG System. They ensure children grow with a strong sense of identity and belonging with the knowledge systems and skills of their first cultures and languages. They also ensure children grow as creative thinkers, with flexible and adaptive skills to engage in a global environment with confidence.

Unlike many programs that attempt to make change by 'fixing' or 'educating' the individual through deficit based, crisis driven and siloed programs, Children's Ground focuses on achieving lasting change by recognising strength and ability and integrating services and supports. We focus on prevention and empowerment and addressing the systemic issues drive disadvantage.

The CG System begins by working with children from pre-birth to eight years of age – and always working with their whole family rather than individuals alone. This recognises that the physical,

social, emotional and economic health and wellbeing of all family members impacts children's education, health and wellbeing.

Education and all other systems and services must respond to the people for whom they are intended. The 2017 Productivity Commission into Human Services states that services need to "...put the people who use human services, such as health care, social housing and family and community services, at the heart of service provision". Therefore, the CG Approach was designed by and is governed, delivered and evaluated by community and cultural leaders and families. It is an approach that empowers individuals, families and the community to lead the change they want to see. Only when people are the decision-makers, designers, deliverers and evaluators of their own future can genuine empowerment be achieved, and a positive impact sustained.

Children's Ground works and walks with communities to ensure children and their families have the sort of opportunities that most Australians enjoy: a high quality education; creative and cultural life; agency in their health and wellbeing; employment; and the right to make decisions over their lives. The CG system is place-based, allowing communities to shift from having little or no access, to having agency over a range of opportunities that support culture, safety, learning, health, economy, skills development, fun and celebration.

Led by local families, Children's Ground actively includes the voices and feedback of children in our practice and design and evaluation.



## Appendix One: An overview of the Children's Ground Approach

Children's Ground is an alternative system and approach to current systems, that to date have failed many First Nations people. The CG Approach recognises that services and systems need to respect and privilege First Nations cultures and embed individual, family and community empowerment and agency.

Children's Ground is a system designed to respond to communities experiencing intergenerational inequity. It was born out of the deep injustice and hope of Aboriginal people living in the unacceptable economic poverty and inequity.

The CG Approach was designed as a place-based platform of prevention and long-term change. It was designed with Aboriginal people and is informed, but not limited by, a robust evidence base from leading national and international experience.

Cultural and Western evidence supports our guiding principles that long term change can only occur through the agency of local children, families and communities and the key social and cultural determinants, including health and education, are critical to future social and economic wellbeing.

Children's Ground recognises it is the conditions within which children are born and raised that will determine their opportunity and choices and ultimately enable or prevent generational change. Most importantly, we recognise that systems and services must respond to the people for whom they are intended, and therefore the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation must be held by the people.

The CG Approach works intensively with children, families and communities from a platform of holistic prevention and early intervention – responding to the social and cultural determinants of health and wellbeing recognised by the World Health Organisation as underpinning all key areas of life and wellbeing.

Extreme disadvantage and economic poverty are preventable, and the CG Approach is a system of prevention for whole communities. It is designed to achieve equity so that all children can grow to adulthood and enjoy opportunity, express their talents and be included and contribute to society – and so that all children can grow with a sense of identity and place for themselves and others, with access to quality health, wellbeing, education and economic independence. Underpinning change in each of the social and cultural determinants across whole communities are the dual principles of self-determination and human rights.

Children's Ground was designed with and for those families and communities which find themselves the most excluded and economically, socially and culturally excluded in our current society. Communities, require long-term, consistent and continuous investment and commitment responding to their culture and life circumstances.

The communities we work with designed and continue to inform and locally adapt the CG Approach. We believe in harnessing the ability of the community, responding to their cultural landscape, and social and economic environment. None of this is possible without genuine community engagement and significant systems reform.

### *Children's Ground vision*

First Nations people across Australia have self-determination and enjoy social, cultural, political and economic justice.

Our next generation of children know and celebrate their culture and identity, have freedom of choice and expression and can live with opportunity, peace, harmony and wellbeing.

Australians recognise our shared history and celebrate First Nations culture and strength.

*The Children’s Ground Approach*

The Children’s Ground Approach (CG Approach) is a 25-year strategy. Led at the community level, the CG Approach addresses the key social, cultural and economic determinants to support generational change.

Local leadership and governance are backed by resources for high-quality learning, health and employment that is culturally responsive and focuses on the child, their family and their community.

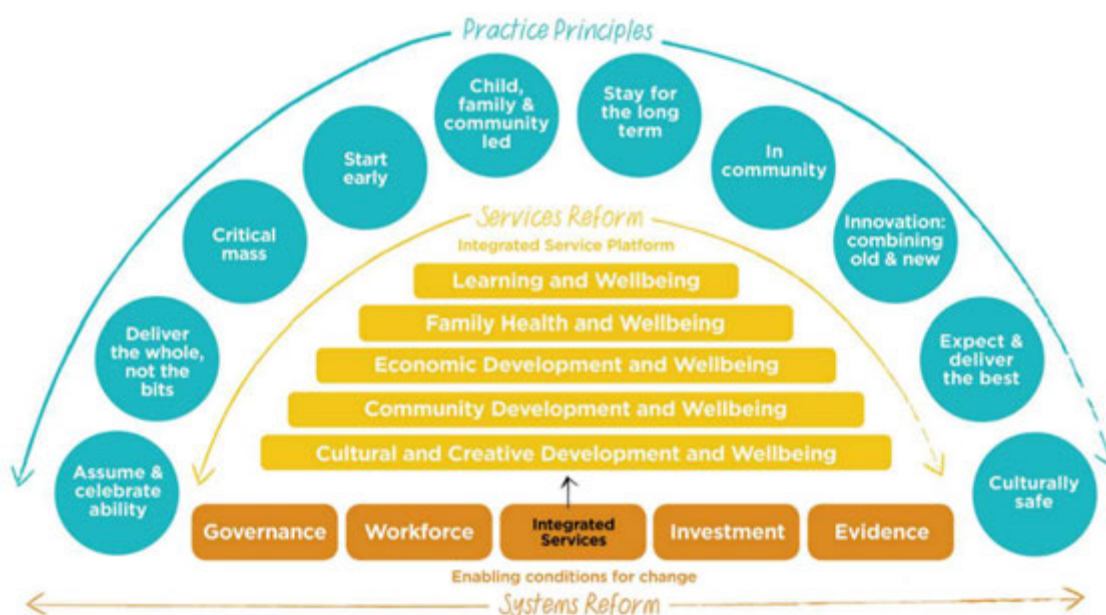
The CG Approach is not a service to people; it is part of the community. It frontloads resources into equitable access and prevention and is an approach that builds the social, cultural and economic capital where children live, building upon a history of resilience. It recognises that children, families and communities who need the most, deserve the best. That they are the experts in their own lives and that their voice and talent are critical to creating change.

Children’s Ground has created a reform agenda that works at three levels, that all inter-relate – referred to as the CG Approach. The CG Approach includes three key components: Principles; Integrated service platform; and Systemic enabling conditions for change.



**Child, family and community together**

**Figure 1: The CG Approach:**



The CG Approach is designed to create a safe environment for children and families. This is achieved by regarding and respecting the individual as well as their culture and identity. The culture and identity of a child is fundamental to their learning and wellbeing. We recognise that the Aboriginal world view connects the development of the person to the land and the people in a sophisticated system that combines education, health, wellbeing, society, law, philosophy, environment and culture.

### What and how services are delivered

The Children’s Ground Approach integrates First Nations knowledge with leading practice in global knowledge systems. In communities, the CG Approach delivers the following services and supports, referred to as the integrated ‘Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform’ (LWD platform).

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

Figure 2: Children’s Ground Learning, Wellbeing and Development platform



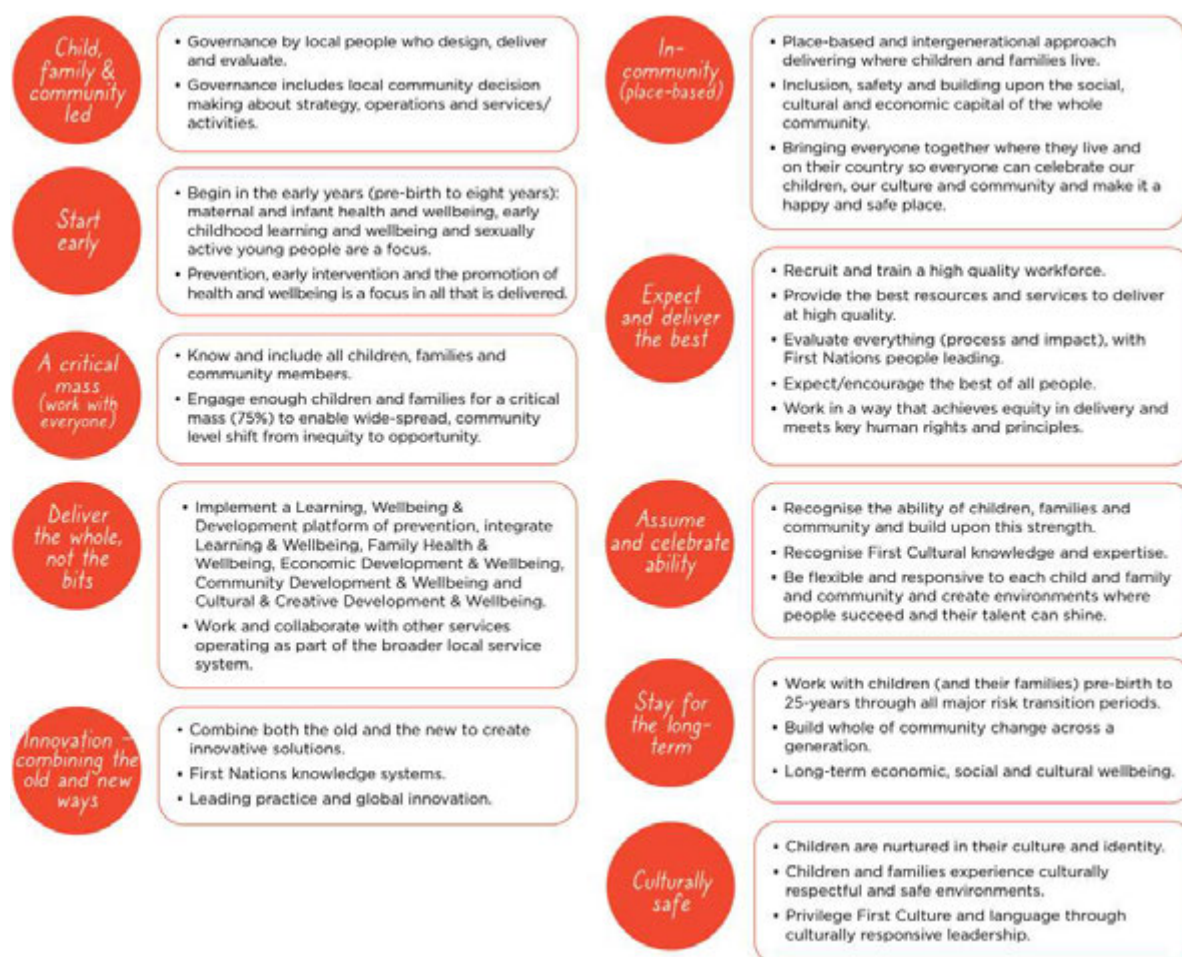
What services are delivered is important, however, how they are delivered is what can lead to engagement, empowerment and sustained change and impact. This is achieved through a clear focus on the Children’s Ground principles.

## Principles

The principles outlined in Figure 3 ensure the CG Approach puts children at the centre and is led by community. They establish the CG Approach as high-quality, strengths-based, place-based, integrated, intergenerational, inclusive, long-term and responsive.

Long term success is premised on the full CG Approach being implemented. This can be implemented through a primary delivering organisation/body or through partnership delivery.

**Figure 3: Principles of the CG Approach**



## Enabling systemic conditions – systems reform

Children’s Ground grew out of decades of work with and by First Nations people, leading to an understanding of the key drivers that prevent change and those that enable change. How the CG Approach addresses these drivers and creates the conditions for change is depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 4: Children’s Ground systems reform**

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

A dual governance system ensures that corporate governance is balanced with local First Nations governance. Day to day decision making is in the hands of community through **community cultural governance** led by Elders. This is supported by **western governance** and a Board of Directors that brings together corporate, financial, not for profit, legal, cultural, health and education expertise.

A high quality and responsive **workforce** that combines cultural and western expertise in each area of delivery is engaged in location. **Local employment** of local talent is a centrepiece. Recognising barriers to employment faced by First Nations people, this is enabled through a unique, flexible ‘no barriers’ approach to **employment and workforce**. A long-term strategy for the new generation to be the economically independent workforce in the region for the future.

**Collective investment** combines philanthropic funding with Government funding to enable scale, excellence, innovation and flexibility to deliver change. Innovative funding partners are committed to funding long-term outcomes rather than short-term outputs alone.

Monitoring and evaluation with robust data collection informs performance quality and development. A longitudinal evaluation is oversighted by a national research advisory group and is co-designed and led by First Nations people on the ground. This builds the **evidence** and evaluates the impact of the CG Approach.

*In summary...*

The Children’s Ground System has two parts – systemic reform and service delivery. The CG Approach, through local community leadership, was designed to reform the system by placing the voice of the people at the heart of the system. It shifts the service system from a deficit model to a strength based culturally responsive system. We are modelling how to implement reform, embed community voice and create an ‘environment’ or system where the community can define their strategies over a generation, define outcomes and be core to service delivery and standards. It places control back in the hands of the people. It is then incumbent on the service system (all organisations) to work in a culturally responsive, integrated, preventative, whole of community approach to achieve the vision of the people where they live, for their children, families and communities over the long term.

## Appendix Two: Children’s Ground’s Research & Evaluation

Since colonisation First Nations people have suffered from culturally ill-informed policies that largely result in exclusion, poor service quality and assimilation. Poorly evidenced initiatives are often based on Western sensibilities, are short-term with inconsistent government funding and political cycles.

Children’s Ground was designed to redress the failings of current service systems. This includes responding to the lack of monitoring and evaluation of programs and services for First Nations people, and the lack of research and evaluation led and undertaken by First Nations people in communities who services are seeking to engage.

Children’s Ground’s [Research & Evaluation \(R&E\) framework](#) articulates principles, approaches and a 25-year longitudinal Monitoring & Evaluation strategy embedded from the outset in each community we work alongside. Research approaches and methods empower individuals and communities, alongside robust western methods that will be respected by governments, policy makers and decision-makers - those who influence the daily lives of First Nations people through their power in systems.

Our evaluation is ethics approved and oversighted by a National Research Advisory Group and governed by local First Nations Governance Groups for each Children’s Ground region and community.

**Figure 5: Overview of Children’s Ground’s Research & Evaluation**

