



By us, for us:

Understanding and measuring First Nations  
child and young person learning and  
wellbeing

## Research Summary

***“This is something we’ve never had before: data collection being done by our families. We know the background of where these children come from. You’ve got to know them – what they’re really like – so you can see how they’re going to learn.”***

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## Introduction and Background

### Project Overview

This research worked with First Nations communities to develop two culturally safe and appropriate, strength-based measurement tools that can monitor the learning and wellbeing of First Nations children and young people. These tools measure First Nations children's cultural knowledge and western education outcomes, and young people's wellbeing, and were validated culturally and statistically. During this research, data was collected for the purposes of statistical validation and for local use to improve education and health outcomes for First Nations children, young people, families and whole communities over the long-term.

This research was undertaken as a nested project within the longitudinal evaluation of the Children's Ground Approach in the Northern Territory. See Appendix 1 for information about Children's Ground (CG).

Central to this project was First Nations people designing, undertaking and analysing data to monitor and plan for cultural and western learning for their children and young people. This research generated evidence about how to balance rigor and scientific methods in measurement tools with place-based cultural values and priorities and to better understand the barriers and enablers to empowering First Nations in leading research and evaluation.

The research data and findings will be used to advocate for policy, investment and systems reform in education, health, social services and employment/economic development approaches. Research processes and learnings can also inform approaches to evaluation and research undertaken with First Nations people.

### Background rationale

The provision and evaluation of First Nations early childhood and youth programs and initiatives is characterised by a lack of culturally appropriate, place-based assessment frameworks and outcome measures.

While there is a growing understanding of the diverse settings in Aboriginal Australia (Robinson 2012) and the need for measures to be informed by local cultural perspectives (Harrison et al, 2012), in the main, child and adolescent screening and assessment tools currently in use reflect western epistemological and ontological frameworks (e.g. AEDC, PEDS, CPI, Brigance Screens, SDQ).

Lowell (2018, p.4) argues that local strengths and priorities in early childhood development 'may be overlooked or deemed irrelevant through the use of standardised assessment tools but [are] essential to address the continuing domination of Western values and practices in early childhood policy and practice in remote communities and to ensure "difference" is not confused with "deficit"'.

This project aligns with key government priorities related to the *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy* (Productivity Commission, 2020), centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges in practice and developing useful, credible and ethical deliverables. It also provided an opportunity to understand and model how First Nations people can lead data collection to measure Closing the Gap targets.

## Research Approach

This section briefly summarises CG’s research approaches applied to develop and validate a Child Learning & Wellbeing tool and Young Person Wellbeing tool, with more information about methods and processes about each tool included in dedicated sections further on.

### First Nations Leadership

To undertake this research, CG already had relationships with First Nations leaders in each community and had existing established First Nations Governance Groups. This project was led by CG’s First Nations Research & Evaluation staff and cultural and community leaders. These leaders are staff and families who are already engaged with and lead CG in and with their communities.

First Nations leadership was embedded at all levels within this research, including project planning, data collection, analysis, reporting and translation. It also included leaders, families and young people in each community as research participants and those who will use the information to inform their planning for activities within the CG Approach.

### Ethics and Data Sovereignty

CG’s First Nations data sovereignty policy ensures all data collected throughout implementation of the CG Approach is owned and controlled by First Nations families engaged with CG. Various levels of First Nations data governance exist at organisational, regional, community and individual levels.

CG’s long-term evaluation has ethics approval from the NT HREC, and follows all related compliance, including informed consent, confidentiality and secure storage of all data and Intellectual Property with varying levels of access depending on purpose of the data and for confidentiality.

This research was approved and supported by the AIATSIS and Northern Territory Human Research Ethics Committees.

### First Nations Cultural Intellectual Property

Drawing from CG’s copyright licence agreement and relevant existing documentation (e.g. AIATSIS, NHMRC and Lowitja research guidelines) a project specific ‘Collecting and protecting First Nations cultural information’ information sheet and consent form were developed for the data being collected. This recognises that different work and projects require the collection of different types of cultural knowledge and practices. For example, Men’s business or Women’s business.



## Child Learning & Wellbeing tool

### Tool development

In 2017 CG's First Nations leaders in Central Australia developed a Child Learning & Wellbeing tool, named *Nthakenhe ampe akweke akaltye-irreme* (*How our little children learn*). At the time, the development of this tool included five sessions with First Nations Elders, cultural authorities, educators and family members.

The tool was initially piloted with 27 children. This adapted and expanded on an existing child development assessment (eHCI)<sup>1</sup> to include meaningful and appropriate cultural learning and wellbeing milestones for children aged 3-7 years of age, as well as standard western learning and wellbeing measures.

In 2022-23, this project undertook the process of refining and validating the tool, both culturally and statistically. A full review of the original tool and its purpose was undertaken by First Nations leaders. See below – Why did we develop this tool?

### **Nthakenhe ampe akweke akaltye-irreme (How our little children learn)**



#### **Why did we develop this tool?**

*This shows our culture, what is important to us and what we want to see our little ones knowing and learning.*

*This will help us build back up our own education and knowledge system and make sure children are learning Aboriginal culture and language into the future.*

*Families have told us they want to see changes for children and families in health, happiness, learning, cultural knowledge, family life - now and in the future.*

*We hope that doing this work will give us power as a community.*

*We can then use this information when we talk with Government and other communities so that they can learn from us, about us.*

*Government and other people in Australia don't know we have our own ways. This survey will help us explain and show what is important for our children's cultural learning.*

<sup>1</sup> 'Early Human Capability Index (eHCI)', developed by Professor Sally Brinkman

## About the tool

Nthakene ampe akweke akaltye-irreme (How our little children learn) tool contains 83 questions which cover the following domains and sub-domains.

# Child Cultural Learning and Wellbeing tool Domains and sub-domains

### Tyerrtye-kenhe Iterrentye (Cultural learning)

- Country
- Family and Kinship
- Plants and animals
- Intergenerational learning
- Cultural ways of teaching and learning

### Akaltye Irretyeke & Arne Mpwaretyeke (Learning, Exploring & Creative) – Approaches to learning

### Arntarnte arelheme (Looking after self/safety)

### Utnenge & Ingkerrenyeke Anyenteke-Irreme (Spirit & Social) – Social and emotional

### Angkentye (Language)

- General verbal communication – In main Aboriginal language
- General verbal communication – In English

### Iterrentye (Mind)

- Formal literacy
- Numeracy and concepts (in any language)

## Data collection

Child Learning & Wellbeing data collection was undertaken by First Nations and Western educators for a total of 47 children aged 0-8 years. Educators worked together to collect the data with families. There was a 100% completion rate, with an average completion time of 15 minutes.

Training and support with the data collection process was provided by the CG's Research & Evaluation team. All educators were supported to understand their role in the data collection process, including how and why data was collected.

Data collection occurred during a holiday period when no formal learning program delivery was occurring. The majority of data was collected in a single day with some follow up occurring in the following week.

A mix of data collection methods were used to support inclusion and cultural safety in the data collection process. This included collecting data in pairs and/or as a group and with family members, as well as collecting data at different locations, wherever people felt most comfortable and where families were available as needed – this saw data collection occur at the CG hub/office, in communities and on country. Providing opportunities for families to share information about the child was found to contribute to successful completion.





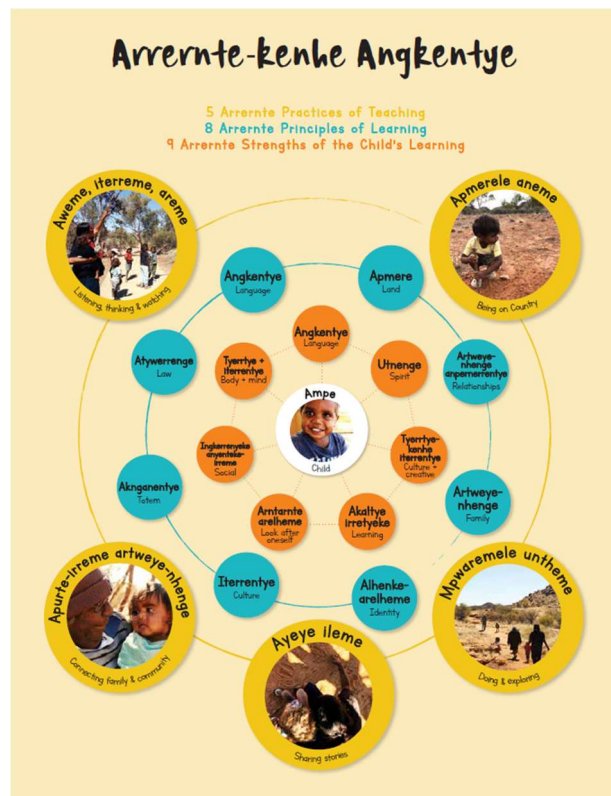
## Cultural and Western validation

Throughout the process of refining the tool cultural validation occurred by First Nations Elders, cultural authorities and educators. Cultural validation occurred in a staged process to identify and finalise the questions within the cultural domains of the tool. These included questions around the cultural knowledge of a child, access to culture and country and cultural aspects of wellbeing such as safety on country – all of which align with the Cultural Learning Curriculum Framework developed by Arrernte Cultural knowledge holders, authorities and educators. See right.

The first session was held with First Nations Directors of CG, and senior First Nations educators. Discussions involved what would be expected from children at different times, how this would depend on each child's development, and progressions of learning. The process of children developing their individual cultural roles and responsibilities were also considered.

A number of questions from the pilot tool were found to be more likely to be known by older children, either in middle or secondary school. These were removed and brought together for consideration in the development of the young person tool. The final set of questions identified in this session were then brought to each CG community group for review and further refinement by 10-12 First Nations leaders across four communities. This process was conducted over two months.

The tool has undergone validation from a western statistical perspective by Professor Sally Brinkman at the University of South Australia. Face validity occurred during the process of question refinement and via feedback during the data collection process. Once the data was collected further statistical validation included discriminate validity (age, gender, attendance and a socioeconomic status indicator). Due to the limited sample size factor analysis was not able to be completed. Further data collection will occur as part of the implementation of the CG Approach and additional statistical analysis and validations will be undertaken including predictive validity.



**CG Cultural Learning Curriculum Framework**

## Young Person Wellbeing tool

### Desktop review

The first step in developing the Young Person Wellbeing tool was undertaking initial desktop research on relevant literature and existing youth wellbeing measures. Fifteen relevant measures were collated to provide example questions for the project team to review and consider the type and breadth of existing questions. The following types of existing tools were reviewed: population monitoring, program evaluation, research, screening tools and assessment tools. The range in domains included social and emotional/mental health, physical health, education, quality of life, school engagement, family functioning and, connection to family, friends and community.

These examples provided the team with knowledge of what would and would not work when developing a tool for our context and that if a validated tool had appropriate domains, it could be used or adapted for our project. Two tools identified had been developed specifically for First Nations young people, however none were considered entirely appropriate for our context to use or adapt.

### Engaging young people and families

A process of engagement with First Nations staff and families at CG was the first step towards engaging young people to work with the team to design the Young Person Wellbeing tool. A research session was held with 17 CG staff included First Nations Elders, educators, western educators and health staff, including our social and emotional wellbeing counsellor. The session consisted of a summary of the project and then a hands-on session where all staff completed a drawing of their own wellbeing.

The primary purpose was to test the data collection process with staff and families to seek their advice on how to best engage with young people, and to seek their feedback on the planned process with young people. The following were identified as important for ensuring cultural and emotional safety in the tool design sessions with young people:

- engage young people in the process was to bring together small groups
- the young people know each other
- a family member was present and listed on the information sheet and consent form
- group rules were discussed and agreed on
- the session aimed to remain strength based and positive.



This session also provided a creative way to engage people in the research as an opportunity to learn about the project and for those supporting our engagement with young people to experience the process that we would be asking young people to undertake. These staff and the project's cultural lead were critical for engaging young people by providing knowledge of kinship structures within their families and communities. They were also critical to ensuring the cultural and emotional safety of the young people engaged.



A total of 17 young people aged between 12 and 18 years were involved in the project. Of these, 13 were from Central Australia and based in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and a community north on the Plenty Highway and 4 were from the Top End and based in Darwin. There was a gender breakdown of 9 female and 8 male participants.

The young people involved with developing the tool came from different family groups structures and different communities. The range of locations they lived in included living in remote community, in town suburbs and town camps. Each young person varied in how much time they spent living out bush on their traditional lands with more access to first language. They attended different types of schools and there was variation across the young people's strength in culture and strength in western ways.



### Tool development

This tool was developed by listening to the voices of First Nations young people, drawing from academic evidence, and support from measurement expertise. Throughout this project the voices of young people were always prioritised.

The team worked with young people, their families, and CG staff to identify cultural wellbeing and other facets of life that keep young First Nations people strong and on track. Initially three focus groups were held with young people to explore their understanding and perceptions of what is important for young people's wellbeing. Advice was that the term wellbeing is not well used, and it would be more appropriate to discuss how strong a young person is or what is keeping them on track.

Young people were engaged to inform all phases of tool development. Consent was obtained from each young person, alongside consent from a family member. For each session an adult was present who had a strong caring role for those young people. Each young person was remunerated with a gift card.

The project team undertook an analysis of the focus groups data to break the information into domains and sub-domains. This analysis was completed with cultural researchers and cultural knowledge holders. The analysis included triangulating young person focus group data, with academic evidence and validated measures to inform the selection of domains, sub-domains and questions for the young person tool.

The academic evidence of relevance included components of wellbeing for First Nations youth in Australia identified in a review conducted by Anderson et al in 2022.



This research conducted a thematic analysis on 29 studies, identifying seven components of wellbeing. The literature review by Roundtree and Smith (2016) on identifying strength-based wellbeing indicators for First Nations children and families was also of use.

The existing young person wellbeing tools that were collated previously were reviewed to identify validated measures that may already exist for the wellbeing domains that aligned with what young people identified as important to measure about their wellbeing. No current measures were found to align.

An initial set of questions were developed based on these established domains and sub-domains. Also, during the child tool review and refinement process a number of items within the cultural knowledge and learning section were found to be more appropriate for older ages (either middle years (8-11 years) or young people (12-18 years)). These included items within the Country, Family and Kinship, and other cultural knowledge domains. These items included knowledge that would be learned consecutively. For example, 3-6 year olds would learn their skin names and older age groups would be learning skin names and relationships, and the full kinship system. Therefore, some cultural knowledge and learning items were removed from the Child Learning & Wellbeing tool and included in the young person tool.

A draft set of questions were compiled from young people's views and opinions informing the wording of each question for the piloting of the tool. These questions were tested and refined with young people in CG Darwin communities and from another CG Central Australian community. The questions were also tested and refined with CG cultural researchers and staff.

This review took into account cultural knowledge and practice for young people in different situations. It made sure the wording would encourage young people to respond and not be considered judgemental or upsetting. An example of refining questions throughout testing included the wording to measure resilience was changed from 'facing problems' to 'dealing with challenges'. 'Dealing with' was considered a more positive way of asking the question, compared with the term 'facing problems' which was considered a more confrontational and negative question. This question was further refined during discussions with young people as 'challenges' was not a well-known work and therefore 'hard things' was decided on.

As a final step the draft questions were reviewed by our statistical and measurement expert, Professor Sally Brinkman. Sally provided feedback on what domains/questions could also be included and how the questions selected would influence the analysis.

The Young Person Wellbeing tool contains 31 questions that are predominantly strength based and responds to the emotional and cultural safety of young people.

## The Young Person Wellbeing domains

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CULTURAL LEARNING  
AND KNOWLEDGE



SUPPORTS AND  
NETWORKS



EDUCATION AND  
ACTIVITIES



HEALTH AND  
WELLBEING

## Data collection

Data collection and was completed with young people self-completing the tool, with the support of a CG First Nations staff member. These were done in family groups of 2-5 young people with a family member always present to provide support if needed. An information sheet and consent form were completed, and the name of the family member recorded. The collection process was generally done by the CG staff member reading out each question and the young person completing their answer themselves, therefore retaining confidentiality. Young people were reimbursed with a gift voucher.

## Ongoing Use and Knowledge Translation

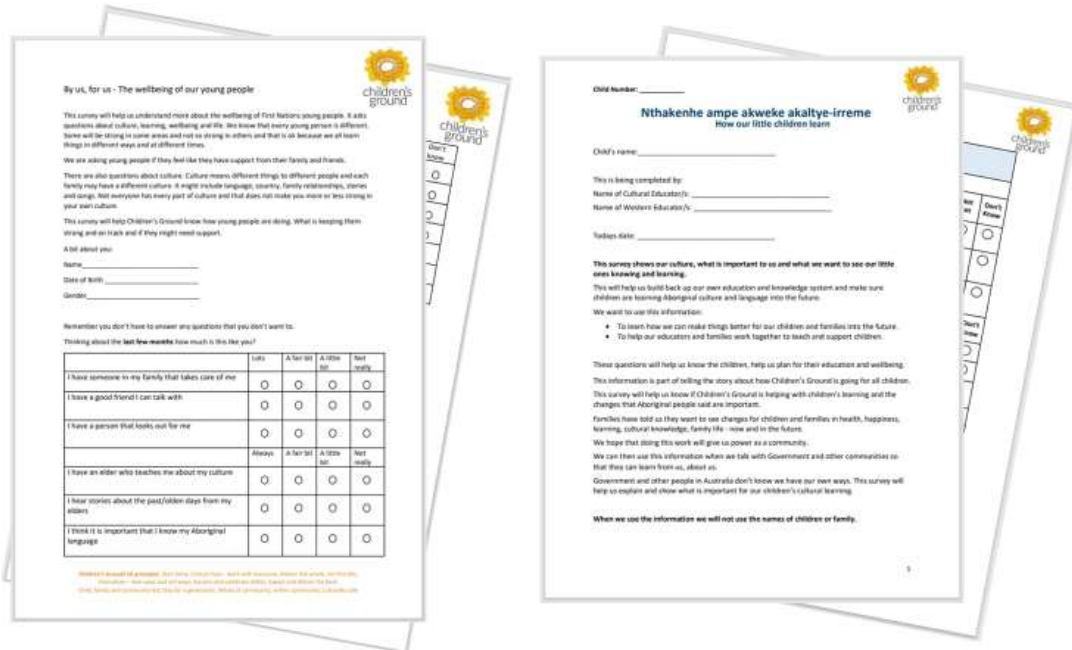
Translating research data and findings into practice is central to all research and evaluation at CG. It is important for First Nations data sovereignty and empowerment in translating knowledge into practice is ways that are relevant, appropriate, useful and beneficial for children, young people, families and whole communities.

These tools will be embedded as key evaluation tools within CG's longitudinal 25-year evaluation. Therefore, knowledge translation planning and considerations were undertaken from the outset, with key processes put in place to ensure the knowledge and evidence generated could be useful and translated into practice through multiple mechanisms.

Ensuring First Nations leadership at all levels of the research, including in the child and young person tool design, was significant. It empowered people in data collected about their children, and ensured the tool's cultural and context appropriateness – this in-turn was critical in knowledge translation because the knowledge and evidence generated was locally relevant.

From the outset of the project, it was important to establish the purpose of both tools within operational settings. Our process included engaging staff from the Research & Evaluation, learning and health teams to ensure the tools was aligned with CG frameworks and practice. It was important for everyone to have a shared understanding of what data was being collected and how it would be used and translated into practice. Through these processes we were able to develop tools with multiple purposes, contributing to measurement of outcomes as well as quality and standards. Both tools can:

- Measure change over time with a cross section of children and young people
- Measure change over time longitudinally with the same cohort of children and young people
- Inform learning, health and social/emotional wellbeing program development
- Inform individual learning and health plans and whole family/household health and wellbeing plans
- Facilitate discussions with children, young people and families about child and young person learning and wellbeing from a cultural and western perspective



Going forward, as key evaluation tools within CG’s longitudinal 25-year evaluation, the Child Learning & Wellbeing tool will be completed for children aged 3-7 years across all CG regions. The Young Person Wellbeing tool will be completed by young people aged approx. 12-16 years, with further review based on further analysis of the pilot data.

This will enable regular access to data for Children’s Ground staff, families and communities about how their children’s learning and wellbeing, and ongoing translation of research and evaluation into practice. Data will also inform strategic and operational planning across the organisation.

We will regularly review and refine these tools as the CG Approach grows and develops in each current CG region and as we begin delivery with new regions. Local First Nations leadership in the development of tools is critical to First Nations data, research and evaluation sovereignty and people being empowered in designing, leading and evaluating their own solutions.

## Research Impact and Contribution

The impact and contribution of this project are short, medium and long-term.

There are currently very limited ways to measure cultural learning domains and impact. A short-term impact and contribution of this research is the completion of the two tools – one being a Child Learning and Wellbeing tool that incorporates cultural learning and wellbeing measures, and one being a Young Person Wellbeing tool, both for First Nations children and young people. These tools both have cultural learning and wellbeing measures created and validated by First Nations people. These tools will be used by Children’s Ground staff and families to inform learning and wellbeing for individuals and groups of children and young people.

The leadership from and empowerment of our First Nations staff involved in the research has been an important short-term benefit that have contributed to increased knowledge, skills and leadership development in the area of research and evaluation. Peer learning about research, cultural safety and child development (cultural and western) between our First Nations and non-First Nations staff

will have long-term impacts through a shared understanding about how to plan and support the holistic learning and wellbeing of First Nations children and young people.

This project adhered to the rights of First Nations people to own and control their own data. It made an important contribution to ongoing First Nations data, research and evaluation sovereignty, with First Nations leadership in the child and young person tools design and data collection. This included First Nations staff and families identifying what data was important to collect to understand cultural wellbeing of children and young people. This process ensured the expertise and cultural standards that are set by Elders and cultural knowledge holders is embedded in our learning and wellbeing work with children and young people. In the context of colonisation, cultural learning and development standards are critical to understanding cultural strengths and measures in learning and wellbeing outcomes. This is important for long-term knowledge strengthening and revitalisation. This process increases empowerment and agency of First Nations people.

Our research findings show a correlation between cultural knowledge/access and other learning and wellbeing outcomes for children. While this was already known by First Nations people, this research and pilot data has provided evidence in a western format that demonstrates the significance of culture on people's wellbeing in a way that will be respected by western systems. This can be used by First Nations communities and organisations to continue advocating for the importance of First Nations education systems being accessible and available to all First Nations children.

The development of these tools has filled this gap, and generated evidence demonstrating the importance of culture and the need for systems reform to better privilege First Nations culture, knowledge systems and approaches. This can impact government and service policy in education, health, social services and economic development. Ongoing data collection and statistical analysis will occur through the use of these tools in our longitudinal evaluation to strengthen and replicate our evidence.

This project has created a pathway to and evidence for ambitious and feasible impacts in policy, systems reform and research. As short and medium-term impacts, research data and findings will also be used in Children's Ground's systems reform advocacy for changes in government policy, investment priorities and in service systems and delivery to achieve for better outcomes for First Nations children, young people and their families.

If the child and young person tools and approach to First Nations led design and development can be adapted and adopted in other First Nations communities (nationally and internationally), the impact and contribution of this research will increase in scale. This is possible with the right partnerships and funding to ensure the tools are adopted and adapted with genuine local First Nations empowerment and leadership in each area to ensure cultural safety and appropriateness across different Nations.

In summary, the outputs, findings and empowerment processes of this research have already achieved significant short-term impacts. Research findings have the potential for wide-scale national and international reach and impact with the right advocacy, support and funding to empower First Nations people to design, deliver and monitor their children's learning and wellbeing – subsequently improving outcomes for First Nations children, young people, families and whole communities over the long-term.

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## Appendix 1: About Children’s Ground

### 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 (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.

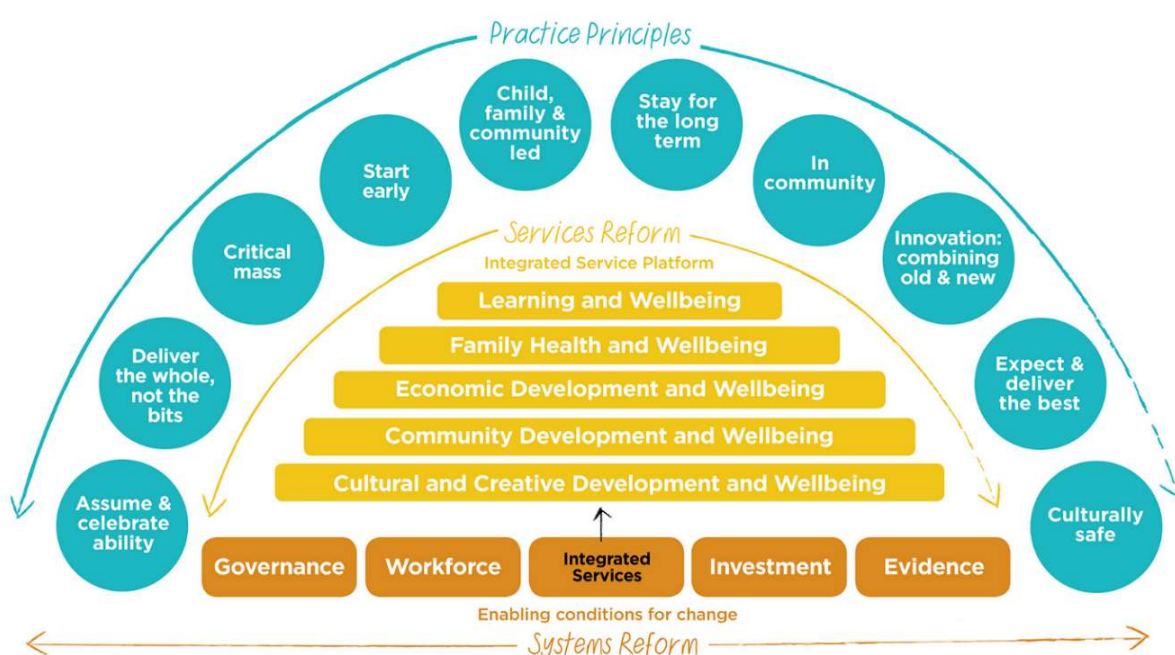
Local leadership and governance are backed by resources for high-quality learning, health and employment that is culturally responsive and focuses on the child, their family and their community.

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.

The CG Approach includes three key components: 1) Principles; 2) Integrated service platform; 3) Systemic enabling conditions for change.



**Child, family and community together**



## The CG Approach - What and how services are delivered

### **Integrated Service Platform**

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 1: 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 1 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.

### 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 2: 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)<br>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.