

Research indicates that earlier and sustained participation in quality education and care is especially beneficial for vulnerable children and can improve lifelong social, learning and development outcomes.

In recognition of this, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development provides funding for eligible children to attend a **free or low cost kindergarten program for the two years before school**, with the aim of improving access and diminishing barriers to participation.

Early Start Kindergarten

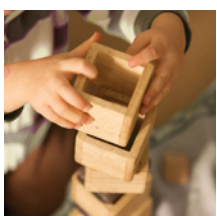
Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) provides eligible three year old children with access to 15 hours of kindergarten per week for free. This grant is available in all settings where the kindergarten program is delivered by a qualified teacher, including in a three year old kindergarten program, a mixed age program or where Early Start enrolments are incorporated into a four year old program.

Early Start Kindergarten is available to children who are three years old by 30 April in the year they are enrolled to attend the program and are either:

- **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander**, or
- **known to Child Protection** or who have been referred to Child FIRST.

This means a child or family who has a history of involvement with Child Protection or has been referred by Child Protection to Child FIRST.

Maternal and Child Health nurses can advise a kindergarten service of a child's eligibility for ESK. Eligibility can also be determined in discussion with a parent or carer, or through a referral from a Child Protection or Child FIRST professional or Koorie Engagement Support Officer.



Supporting access

Maternal and Child Health nurses are encouraged to assist families to access ESK and to work with early childhood educators to support each child's engagement and sustained participation.

The two year Key Ages and Stages visit is an opportunity to promote ESK to families who may be eligible and to assist families to access kindergarten. Children can be referred to an early childhood education and care service when they are two to ensure they secure a place for the following year.

Sharing information

Once a child is referred to a kindergarten service, Maternal and Child Health nurses have an opportunity to assist a child's early childhood educators to develop a learning and development plan tailored to their individual needs.

With parental consent, Maternal and Child Health nurses can share useful information with the child's early childhood education and care service, including:

- the outcomes of PEDs and Brigance assessments
- relevant information about a child's developmental needs
- other information about the child that can help educators support the child and encourage their sustained participation in kindergarten.

Families may have privacy concerns about sharing information. Only information relevant to the learning and development of their child within the kindergarten program should be shared.



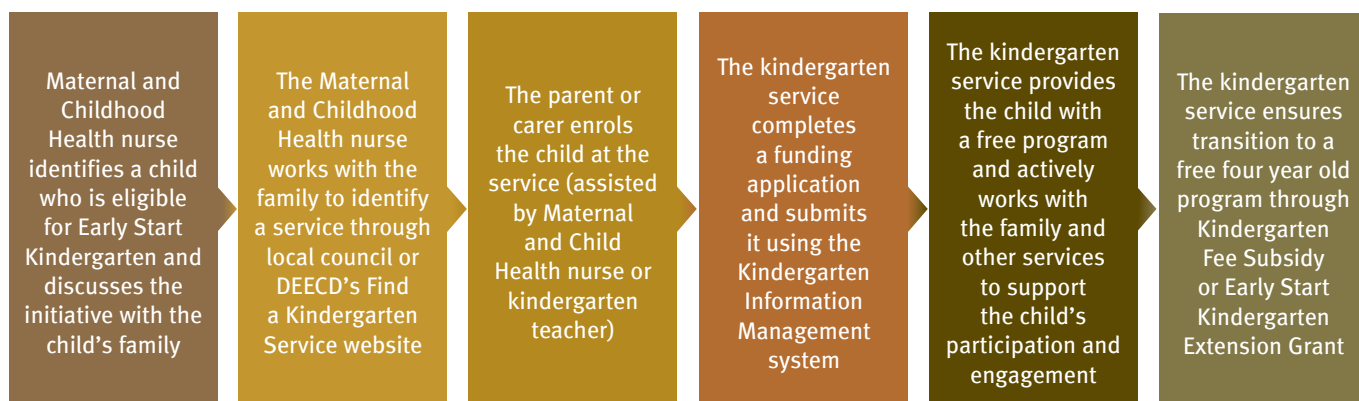
Following up and supporting engagement

The three and a half year Key Ages and Stages visit is an opportunity to speak with families about their child's experience with Early Start Kindergarten. Through this discussion, Maternal and Child Health nurses may identify information that could be helpful to educators working with child and family. Maternal and Child Health nurses can take the opportunity to obtain consent and share relevant information with educators.

If eligible children are not enrolled or have stopped attending kindergarten, the visit is an opportunity to promote ESK and reinforce the value of kindergarten. Though participating in a full year is best, eligible children can access ESK at any point during the year, and enrolling or returning to kindergarten late in the year benefits children, as it facilitates their transition into kindergarten in the year before school.



Referral process for Early Start Kindergarten



Sample cases to guide eligibility

If you are still in doubt about a child's eligibility, contact your regional Department office for advice.

Examples of child eligible to participate in Early Start Kindergarten

- ✓ Children who are, or have been, in foster care, permanent care or kinship care
- ✓ Children who are on, or have been on, community and statutory orders from Child Protection in any state
- ✓ Children without substantiated concerns referred to Child FIRST from Child Protection
- ✓ Children from families who self-refer to Child FIRST or family services where siblings have had involvement in Child Protection (protective concerns investigated or substantiated).

Finding a kindergarten service

Kindergarten programs are offered in a range of settings, including children's centres, long day care centres, community kindergartens and some schools.

You can work with the child's family to locate a kindergarten service that provides places for three year olds by visiting: www.education.vic.gov.au/findaservice/Home.aspx

Many local councils run central enrolment schemes and may be able to assist in locating a suitable kindergarten service.

Other funding available

Children who access kindergarten programs through Early Start Kindergarten grants may also apply for additional support through **Kindergarten Inclusion Support packages (KIS)** or **Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS)** packages if they meet the specific criteria for support.

Free or low cost kindergarten for children in the year before school

The **kindergarten fee subsidy** provides eligible four year old children access to 15 hours of kindergarten a week for free or at a low cost. The kindergarten fee subsidy is available to children who are four years old by 30 April in the year they are enrolled to attend the program and who are:

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander**,
- identified on their birth certificate as a **multiple birth child** (triplets or more), or
- who hold or whose parents hold an **eligible concession card or visa**

The **Early Start Kindergarten extension grant** provides a free or low cost program for children in the year before school who accessed Early Start Kindergarten or an Access to Early Learning program in the previous year and who are not eligible for the kindergarten fee subsidy.

More information

For more information for families about Early Start Kindergarten visit: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/Kindergarten/Pages/earlystart.aspx>

For more information for families about kindergarten fee subsidy and Early Start Kindergarten extension grant visit: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/Kindergarten/Pages/fees.aspx>

Interpreter service

Maternal and Child Health nurses can help non English speaking families understand more about kindergarten programs and Early Start Kindergarten with the assistance of the interpreter service by calling **03 9280 1907**.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development regional contacts

Staff in Departmental regional offices or Koori Engagement Support Officers (KESO) can assist families with any queries about kindergarten programs. To find your nearest regional office, see: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/regions.htm>