

Early Start Kindergarten

Information for Child Protection and Child First

Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) continues to be available to all eligible children during the roll-out of universal Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.

ESK is a grant funded by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) that provides eligible three-year-old children with access to up to 15 hours of free or low cost kindergarten per week.

ESK enables three-year-old children experiencing vulnerability to have two years of high-quality early education and care. This positively impacts a child's social, cognitive, academic and emotional development.

Funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten started in 2020 as part of a decade-long roll-out across Victoria. It is important that all eligible children continue to access ESK, even if funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten is available. This will ensure that they can access the full 15 hours a week of funded kindergarten in all service settings including long day care.

There is no change to how ESK is administered during the roll-out of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. Applications for ESK are submitted by the kindergarten or long day care service on behalf of the child.

Children eligible for Early Start Kindergarten

ESK is available to children who are at least three years old by 30 April in the year they are enrolled to attend the program and are either:

- from a refugee or asylum seeker background, or
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or
- known to Child Protection or referred to Child FIRST from Child Protection.

Supporting access

Child Protection, Child FIRST and family services professionals are encouraged to assist eligible children to enrol in a free kindergarten program using ESK grants.

1. It is important to:

- identify a child who is eligible for ESK early and link them with a service that offers a State funded kindergarten program which is available in many long day care services
- talk with families or carers to find out their interest in being connected with a service
- work with the family to identify a service by contacting local council, or visiting [Find a Service](#) on the Department's website.

2. Research indicates that quality early childhood education matters in supporting children's learning and development. You can support families in accessing a high quality service, by reviewing services' quality ratings at the [Starting Blocks website](#).

3. Discuss the child's needs and placement with the service and assist the parent or carer to enrol their child at a suitable service. Two-year-old children can be referred to an early childhood education and care service to ensure they secure an ESK place for the following year.

4. You can discuss any questions you have about ESK with your local government or closest Department office.

Early Start Kindergarten in long day care

When supporting an eligible child to enrol in long day care, it is important to make sure they access a funded kindergarten program to receive the ESK grant. You can confirm which groups offer funded kindergarten programs with the long day care service, or by looking for the Kinder Tick.

ESK can be used in conjunction with the Australian Government's Child Care Subsidy and Additional Child Care Subsidy.

Kinder Tick

The Victorian Government is making it easier for families to find funded and approved kindergarten programs through the Kinder Tick.

When you see the Kinder Tick, you can be confident:

- the program will be led by a qualified teacher
- children will benefit from play-based learning
- the kindergarten program is funded and approved by the Victorian Government
- the program complies with government guidelines and the National Quality Framework.

This is the same in both long day care and sessional or "standalone" kindergarten services.

Quality and hours matter

When assisting a family to locate a kindergarten service, it is important to find a high-quality kindergarten program delivered by a degree-qualified teacher, and at a service where the family can maintain regular participation.

A high-quality kindergarten program can:

- sustain a child's key social and emotional skills over time
- improve a child's development, long-term achievement and wellbeing
- provide children with a significant developmental advantage (particularly for vulnerable children, and if they access kindergarten for two years).

It is also important to find a program that provides children with access to the full 15 hours a week of kindergarten. Participation of at least 15 hours per week positively impacts a child's educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes.

Commitment to enrolling children in out-of-home care in Early Start Kindergarten

[The Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care](#) (the Agreement) prioritises and supports the learning, development, health and wellbeing of children in out-of-home care, helping them to achieve their best. The Agreement has a particular focus on increasing access to Maternal and Child Health services and high-quality early childhood education and care services in the two years before school.

Regional office contacts

Staff in Departmental regional offices, Early Childhood Learning Advisers, or Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) can assist families with queries about ESK or any other kindergarten program.

North East Victoria 1300 333 231

North West Victoria 1300 338 691

South East Victoria 1300 338 738

South West Victoria 1300 333 232

A full list of the Department's regional offices can be found on the [contact webpage](#).

For more information about ESK visit [Early Start Kindergarten for Professionals](#).