

Bush Kinder Grants Program Guidelines

For applications in 2024



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Department
of Education

Bush Kinder Grants Program Guidelines

Guidelines for 2024 applications, for funding for the 2025 calendar year

Introduction

As part of the Victorian Government's commitment to making Victoria the Education State and giving our youngest Victorians the Best Start to their Best Life, the Government is delivering an ambitious overhaul of the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, with a \$14 billion reform over the next decade.

The 2023/24 Victorian Budget set out additional investment of more than \$1.8 billion over 5 years in early childhood education.¹ This built on the Government's existing \$4.4 billion investment in Best Start, Best Life, including Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and takes the investment to date to \$6.2 billion.²

The Bush Kinder Grants Program provides up to 150 one-off payments of \$6,000 per successful kindergarten service per year for four years to establish a new or enhance an existing bush kinder program. Round 1 of the Bush Kinder Grants Program was held in 2023, with grants awarded to 150 kindergarten services.

The Victorian Government is investing in bush kinder programs to see more Victorian kindergarten services set up nature programs, giving children more opportunity to get outdoors, climb trees and get grubby.

Play-based learning is a powerful way to support a child's development. Research over the past few decades has revealed how the human brain is biologically primed for learning from birth. This is when children have the greatest opportunities to develop neural pathways for learning.

High-quality Victorian kindergarten programs are underpinned by both the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and the National Quality Framework (NQF). The VEYLDF Practice Principle Integrated Teaching and Learning Approaches highlights that play is essential to stimulating a wide range of children's sensory, physical and cognitive experiences. It is important for children to have a variety of play experiences including unstructured and structured play, indoor and outdoor play, solo and group play, craft and creative play, and more. When children get variety of play, all aspects of their learning and development benefit – physical, social, cognitive, emotional and imaginative.³

The VEYLDF and the NQF acknowledge the critical importance of outdoor play for young children's learning, including physical and cognitive development and wellbeing, and ability to assess risk. The State of Nature Play, Outdoor Learning and Bush Kinder in Victoria report (2018) found that access to active and self-directed play in nature and the outdoors is essential for healthy child development, physical health, mental health and wellbeing.⁴

What is bush kinder?

Bush kinder programs are early learning educational programs that are regularly delivered outdoors through natural environments. The natural spaces suited to bush kinder programs include

¹ [The Best Start for Victoria | Victorian Government \(www.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.vic.gov.au).

² Ibid.

³ Raising Children's Network, *Why is Play Important*, Raising Children's Network, 2022, accessed 28 November 2022.

⁴ Kids in Nature Network, *The State of Nature Play, Outdoor Learning and Bush Kinder in Victoria*, Kids in Nature Network, 2018.

places such as metropolitan parks, regional parks, local bushland, local beaches, and visitor sites within national and state parks. Bush kinder programs give children a unique opportunity and freedom to learn through play with natural materials in outdoor environments.

By increasing the amount of time children spend outdoors and in natural environments, bush kinder programs can help to:

- improve children's wellbeing, physical development, fine and gross motor skills, core strength, co-ordination, balance, eyesight and physical endurance
- encourage children to build deeper understandings of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)
- support children to make decisions and judgements that challenge and safely explore established boundaries
- improve children's connections to nature, which can encourage their knowledge and commitment to environmental sustainability into adulthood.

Grants Program scope and objectives

The Bush Kinder Grants Program aims to:

- reduce existing barriers for kindergarten services to implement bush kinder programs,
- increase the number of children engaged in outdoor learning and nature play, and
- enhance children's physical health, wellbeing and learning outcomes in line with the VEYLDF).

The Bush Kinder Grants Program will open for applications from eligible kindergarten services each year for four years. Up to 150 one-off \$6,000 grants will be provided to kindergarten services each year.

The Bush Kinder Grants Program will support successful kindergarten services to do one of the following:

- establish a new or enhance an existing **off-site** bush kinder program held regularly in a local outdoor natural space, or
- establish a new or enhance an existing **on-site** bush kinder program by improving the above-ground outdoor biodiversity of the existing kindergarten premises, if suitable off-site locations are unavailable.

Grant applications must be exclusively for either off-site or on-site programs, with off-site programs given priority. Services cannot apply to split the grant funding between off-site and on-site programs.

Kindergarten services that were awarded grant funding in 2023 are not eligible to re-apply for further grant funding in future years. Services that were unsuccessful in previous rounds may re-apply.

Off-site bush kinder programs

Kindergarten services will need to decide the most suitable bush kinder site that reflects the philosophy and overall learning goals of their kindergarten educational program and their community needs based on their local circumstances.

The outdoor natural spaces suited to bush kinder programs include places such as metropolitan parks, regional parks, local bushland, local beaches and visitor sites within national and state parks. The needs of children with a disability or developmental delay should form part of kindergarten services' off-site bush kinder program planning.

Applications for off-site bush kinder programs must confirm that the off-site location was selected with appropriate kindergarten community engagement and engagement with the relevant authorities for site use (i.e. Parks Victoria / local council / Traditional Owners / other landowners must be consulted / engaged / give approval where necessary).

Kindergarten services must also ensure they meet the regulatory requirements related to delivering an off-site bush kinder program, including the risk assessments for all excursions and regular outings under the Education and Care Services National Regulations (regulation 100 and 101). For further information see: [ACECQA Information Sheet: The Legislative Requirements of an In-Nature Program](#).

On-site bush kinder programs

If an appropriate natural environment external to the licenced premises cannot be accessed, the Bush Kinder Grants Program will support kindergarten services to fund outdoor above-ground natural learning experiences. In these circumstances, grant funding can be used to improve the biodiversity of the existing kindergarten service's outdoor premises to provide a more stimulating natural environment for children. For example, kindergarten services could add a raised garden bed or above-ground planter box to increase the overall plant variety and biodiversity at their service. Kindergarten services could establish an above-ground vegetable garden or bush tucker garden to support their intention of learning against one or more of the VEYLDF Outcomes.

Kindergarten services should be thoughtful about how their educational program will engage children in hands-on learning through planting, growing, maintaining, and harvesting plants. The needs of children with a disability or developmental delay should form part of kindergarten services' on-site bush kinder program planning (e.g., sensory gardens, accessibility).

Applications for on-site bush kinder programs must only be submitted in cases where off-site options have been considered and are not viable in the kindergarten service's specific circumstances. Kindergarten services must attest to this in their application.

An off-site program may be considered unviable based on there being, for example:

- no suitable/available off-site location within reasonable distance of the service
- accessibility issues that cannot be overcome for identified off-site locations.

On-site improvements will not be considered in conjunction with off-site programs, as the grants are exclusive to off-site OR on-site, not both. Off-site programs will be given priority for grant funding in the event the grants program is oversubscribed.

Key dates for 2024 applications

Date	Event
Thursday 8 August 2024	Grant applications open
Monday 9 September 2024	Grant applications close
September/October 2024	Department assesses applications
November 2024	Department advises applicants of application outcomes
December 2024	Funding paid to successful applicants

Date	Event
No later than Term 2, 2025	Bush kinder programs in operation at successful kindergarten services
October-December 2025	Kindergarten services complete acquittal of their grant funding <i>(the department will be in touch with successful applicants about this separately)</i>

Kindergarten services are reminded that this is a multi-year grants program, and applications will open again in the second half of 2025 and 2026 for bush kinder programs commencing the following calendar year.

Unsuccessful applicants in the 2024 grants round are encouraged to reapply in future rounds. Successful grant recipients of the 2023 grants round will not be considered in future rounds as the grants are a one-off contribution.

Who can apply?

Your organisation can apply to the Bush Kinder Grants Program if your kindergarten service:

- is currently funded to deliver a kindergarten program in Victoria
- has a current National Quality Standard (NQS) rating of Working Towards NQS, Meeting NQS, Exceeding NQS or Excellent
- has undertaken (or made significant progress towards) necessary administrative and curriculum planning and stakeholder engagement to embed a bush kinder program into the existing curriculum, in line with the VEYLDF, commencing no later than Term 2, 2025, OR already operates a bush kinder program in line with the VEYLDF
- has endorsement from the approved provider, nominated supervisor and kindergarten teaching team to commence or continue a bush kinder program, and
- meets their obligations of the Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations with no significant compliance issues or incidents outstanding with the Department of Education.

What can the funding be used for?

Funding must be expended on equipment/items and/or services/time-release that support the establishment or enhancement of bush kinder programs regularly held off-site or on-site for three and/or four-year-old children. Examples of equipment/items and services/time-release that can and cannot be purchased/claimed using grant funding are provided in the tables in the **Appendix** to these guidelines.

Grant recipients will be required to spend the one-off grant funding in the period from December 2024 to December 2025. No costs incurred prior to December 2024 or after December 2025 can be covered by the grant funding.

A **minimum of 75 per cent of the \$6,000 grant funding (at least \$4,500)** must be used to purchase **equipment/items** for use in the bush kinder program. Kindergarten services must take care to purchase child-safe and age-appropriate equipment for their bush kinder programs.

A **maximum of 25 per cent of the \$6,000 grant funding (no more than \$1,500)** can be used for **services and/or time-release** including professional learning and backfill for teaching staff.

Ongoing operational costs associated with the bush kinder program are the responsibility of the kindergarten service and the grant funding must not be used for ongoing costs related to the program.

When applying to the Grants Program, kindergarten services will be asked to specify an estimated dollar spend against each category from which they wish to purchase equipment/items and/or services/time-release using Grants Program funding. There is no requirement to list the exact items the kindergarten service intends to buy within each category.

Funding acquittal

As a condition of funding, successful applicants must complete an acquittal.

Kindergarten services that successfully obtain grant funding in 2024 will be contacted by the department in the second half of 2025 with information about acquittal process and timing. The acquittal process is planned to conclude no later than December 2025.

Successful kindergarten services are advised to keep records of how the grant funding was expended, including receipts for purchases made using grant funding.

As part of the acquittal, kindergarten services will be required to report on how the grant funding has supported the establishment or enhancement of a bush kinder program for their kindergarten services in line with the VEYLDF and NQS.

Submitting an application

Application process and support

Before applying, kindergarten services are encouraged to read and understand these Bush Kinder Grants Program Guidelines in full.

Kindergarten services are advised to submit their application in 2024 only if they are certain their bush kinder program will be operational no later than the start of Term 2, 2025. Applications will be open again in, 2025 and 2026.

All applications must be submitted online through [SmartyGrants](#).

Kindergarten services must be registered to use the SmartyGrants application system. Registration is free.

For assistance with the online application system, please email the [SmartyGrants Support Desk](#) or call (03) 9320 6888 between 9:00am – 5:00pm (Monday to Friday).

Kindergarten services can also consult the [SmartyGrants help guide](#).

Application commitments

By submitting an application:

- kindergarten services accept and agree to:
 - the requirements outlined in these Bush Kinder Grants Program Guidelines, including that they meet (or will by no later than the start of the bush kinder program) the regulatory requirements related to delivering a bush kinder program, including the risk assessments for all excursions and regular outings under the Education and Care Services National Regulations (regulation 100 and 101),
 - commencing or continuing delivery of their bush kinder program no later than the start of Term 2, 2025,

- spending the grant funding between December 2024 and December 2025, and
- completing an acquittal process by no later than December 2025.
- kindergarten services acknowledge that, should they be successful:
 - no additional grant funding will be allocated for cost overruns (kindergarten services and/or approved providers must cover any additional costs)
 - the kindergarten service will not be eligible to apply to the Bush Kinder Grants Program in a future grant round within the four-year funding period,
 - the delivery of the bush kinder program, and the appropriateness of equipment/ items purchased and/or services/time-release using the grant funding is entirely the responsibility of the kindergarten service and approved provider, and the Department of Education bears no responsibility whatsoever by virtue of having allocated grant funding to a successful applicant (kindergarten service) to the Bush Kinder Grants Program,
 - kindergarten service details of successful applicants will be retained on an internal-to-government departmental register of Victorian funded kindergarten services providing bush kinder programs, and
 - kindergarten services may be contacted in future by the Department of Education in relation to:
 - delivery of their bush kinder program, and/or
 - evaluation of the Bush Kinder Grants Program.

Grants Program application requirements

The following information is sought in the online Bush Kinder Grants Program application form:

- details of two key contact people for the application, including name, position, mobile phone number and email address
- kindergarten service details including
 - provider approval number
 - kindergarten service name and ID
 - kindergarten service current NQS rating
 - kindergarten service for-profit or not-for-profit status, noting that preference will be given to not-for-profit kindergarten services if demand is greater than can be accommodated (evidence of not-for-profit status required via upload)
- confirmation of whether the kindergarten service intends to commence/continue an off-site bush kinder program or an on-site bush kinder program, and either,
 - *for off-site bush kinder programs only*: confirmation that the off-site location was selected with appropriate stakeholder engagement and approval (i.e., through engagement with Parks Victoria / local council / Traditional Owners / other landowners)]
 - *for on-site programs only*: confirmation that off-site options have been considered and are not viable in the kindergarten service's specific circumstances
- an estimated dollar spend against each category from which the kindergarten service wishes to purchase equipment/items and/or services/time-release
- confirmation that the kindergarten service has, or will have in place, appropriate VEYLDF-aligned curriculum, risk management, inclusion and other plans as appropriate, no later than the commencement of the bush kinder program

- confirmation that the kindergarten service can meet the regulatory requirements related to delivering a bush kinder program including the risk assessments for all excursions and regular outings (regulation 100 and 101)
- confirmation that the kindergarten service can meet compliance requirements as outlined below under 'Compliance Requirements', and
- confirmation that the kindergarten service management is supportive of bush kinder, and commits to continuing a bush kinder program into the future as part of its three and/or four-year-old kindergarten program offering, beyond the term of the grant funding
- responses to two targeted selection criteria, limited to 350-word per response;

1. Demonstrate how your kindergarten service plans to establish (or enhance) and embed bush kinder/nature play into your existing kindergarten program

Please outline:

- *your service's motivation for delivering a bush kinder/nature play program and explain how it aligns with your service's philosophy and connects with your existing educational program to improve children's outcomes as outlined in VEYLDF*
- *the main policies and plans you have in place to operate the bush kinder/nature play program and ensure it operates safely and in line with regulations (i.e. program planning, risk management, inclusion planning, program evaluations and review).*

2. Demonstrate how your service has collaborated with stakeholders to determine the location of the bush kinder/nature play program and ensure its success

Please outline:

- *who you have engaged with to determine a suitable location for your bush kinder/nature play program*
- *how families have been or will be involved in / informed of your service's plan for establishing a bush kinder/nature play program*
- *whether staff and management/leadership have prepared for and are supportive of the program.*

How will applications be assessed?

Applications will be assessed by the department. An initial eligibility check will occur to confirm each applicant's status as a funded Victorian kindergarten service with a current NQS rating and no compliance or performance issues.

If the Bush Kinder Grants Program is oversubscribed, priority will be given (in order) to kindergarten services that are:

- establishing new programs (rather than enhancing existing programs)
- seeking funding for off-site programs (rather than on-site programs)
- not-for-profit, and
- socioeconomically disadvantaged (assessed based on School Readiness Funding data).

Geographic distribution across the state and responses to the two short-answer questions will also be taken into consideration in determining successful applicants (kindergarten services) if the grant round is oversubscribed.

Application outcomes

Funding will be allocated at the discretion of the department.

Applicants will be advised of the outcome of their application in writing. All application outcomes are final.

Funding is available for up to 150 kindergarten services per year over the remaining three-year funding period (600 kindergarten services in total, each receiving a one-off \$6,000 payment).

Submitting an application does not guarantee funding will be awarded to your kindergarten service.

Compliance requirements

National Law and Regulations

The Education and Care Services National Law and the Education and Care Services National Regulations outline the legal obligations of approved providers, nominated supervisors, and educators and explain the powers and functions of the state and territory regulatory authorities and Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. For information specific to the legislative requirements of a bush kinder program, see: [ACECQA Information Sheet: The Legislative Requirements of an In-Nature Program](#).

For information on operating an early childhood service, and the associated obligations, see: <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-03/Guide-to-the-NQF-4-OpRequirements.pdf>

Child Safe Standards

All services that deliver a program to children have a legal responsibility to comply with Child Safe Standards in Victoria. For further information, see: <https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-services-child-safe-standards>.

Betrayal of Trust

From 1 July 2019, non-government organisations funded by the Victorian Government to deliver services to children will be required, as a condition of funding to be:

- incorporated separate legal entities that can be sued in their own right in child abuse proceedings.
- appropriately insured against child abuse.

For further information, see: [Victorian Funding Requirements for Services to Children Fact Sheet.doc \(eduweb.vic.gov.au\)](#)

Resources

The following links are provided as a starting point for considering best practice approaches to establishing and delivering a bush kinder program. Kindergarten services are encouraged to undertake their own research to determine how to best establish and embed bush kinder into their kindergarten program.

Department of Education

- [Bush Kinder web page](#)

- [Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework](#)

Parks Victoria

- [Bush Kinder web page](#)

Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority

- [National Quality Framework](#)
- [ACECQA Information Sheet: The Legislative Requirements of an In-Nature Program](#)
- [ACECQA Information Sheet: The How and Why of In-Nature Programs](#)

Information privacy

The information you provide will be dealt with in accordance with the Public Records Act 1973 and the Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014.

Further information

If you have any queries, contact the Department of Education Bush Kinder Grants Program team at: bush.kinder.grants@education.vic.gov.au

Appendix

The following tables provide *examples* of equipment/items and services/time-release that constitute eligible and ineligible Grants Program funding expenditure.

The examples are listed according to a selection of categories represented in **bold typeface**, and these are the categories that are used in the application form.

When applying to the Grants Program, kindergarten services will be asked to specify an estimated dollar spend against each category from which they wish to purchase equipment/items and/or services/time-release using Grants Program funding. There is no requirement to list the exact items the kindergarten service intends to buy within each category.

Off-site programs: examples of what funding can and cannot be used for

Examples of what funding can be used for <i>(Kindergarten services must take care to purchase child-safe and age-appropriate equipment for their bush kinder programs)</i>	Examples of what funding <u>cannot</u> be used for
<p>Equipment / Items (minimum 75% of grant expenditure):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor weather-proof clothing and footwear (for children and staff) – gumboots, raincoats, rain pants, hats, gloves, waterproof bags • Safety equipment – first aid kits, EpiPens, allergy buddy, high-visibility vests, walkie talkies, insect nets, GPS devices • General equipment – tarps, mats, trolleys, water containers, portable shelter / shade, portable toilet, boundary markers, witches' hats • Tools – compasses, magnifying glasses, binoculars, utensils • Storage – outdoor sheds or indoor cabinets for the sole use of storage of bush kinder program clothing and equipment <p>Services / time-release (maximum of 25% grant spending):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional learning – as relevant to developing and/or delivering the bush kinder program • Engagement of specialists/consultants – e.g. Traditional Owners, bush kinder specialists • Administrative costs – backfill for teaching staff (only), for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ programming time to plan bush kinder curriculum content ○ engagement with relevant stakeholders (e.g. Parks Victoria / local council / Traditional Owners / other land owners) to secure off-site location as part of initial program set-up or enhancement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reimbursement for items purchased prior to grant funding being awarded • Transport expenses of any kind • Ongoing operational costs – e.g. salaries, utility bills, lease costs, maintenance/repair works, insurance, ongoing gardening/landscaping services, rentals, administration fees, permits, marketing, licensing, etc • Toys/play equipment – tree swings, climbing structures, balance beams, slack lines, sandpits • Information technology equipment/software – laptops, iPads, iPhone, cameras (noting that funding is available for some IT as part of the Building Blocks Improvement grants: Building Blocks Grants - Improvement Victorian School Building Authority (schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au)) • Licences for off-site outdoor space(s)

On-site programs: examples of what funding can and cannot be used for

Examples of what funding can be used for <i>(Kindergarten services must take care to purchase child-safe and age-appropriate equipment for their bush kinder programs)</i>	Examples of what funding <u>cannot</u> be used for
<p>Equipment / Items (minimum 75% of grant expenditure):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor weather-proof clothing and footwear (for children and staff) – gumboots, raincoats, rain pants, hats, gloves • Safety equipment – first aid kits, EpiPens, allergy buddy • General equipment – tarps, mats, trolleys, water containers, portable shelter / shade • Tools – compasses, magnifying glasses, binoculars, utensils • Storage – outdoor sheds or indoor cabinets for the sole use of storage of bush kinder program clothing and equipment • Plants and gardening materials – plants and seeds, above-ground planter boxes / raised garden bed, shovels/spades, buckets, rakes, watering equipment, secateurs <p>Services / time-release (maximum of 25% grant spending):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional learning – as relevant to developing and/or delivering the bush kinder program • Administrative costs – backfill for teaching staff (only), for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ programming time to plan bush kinder curriculum content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reimbursement for items purchased prior to grant funding being awarded • Transport expenses of any kind • Ongoing operational costs – staff salaries, utility bills, lease costs, maintenance/repair works, insurance, ongoing gardening/landscaping services, rentals, administration fees, permits, marketing, licensing, etc • Toys/play equipment – tree swings, climbing structures, balance beams, slack lines, sandpits • Information technology equipment/software – laptops, iPads, iPhone, cameras (noting that funding is available for some IT as part of the Building Blocks Improvement grants: Building Blocks Grants - Improvement Victorian School Building Authority (schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au))

Kindergarten services are advised that any on-site improvements to the outdoor learning environment are to be surface level (above-ground) only, such as installing plants in planter boxes.

As per the [Building Blocks Grants guidelines](#), a Soil Hygienist Report is required for any project that disturbs the soil. Accordingly, on-site improvements to kindergarten services where soil is disturbed, and IT purchases, are **out of scope** for the Bush Kinder Grants Program.

Building Blocks Grants Program

Through the department's Building Blocks Grants program, eligible kindergarten services can apply for upgrades to early childhood buildings and facilities (including outdoor areas and playgrounds) and purchase equipment to provide safe and more inclusive environments for children of all abilities. Further information on these grant programs, including opening and closing dates is available at [Victorian School Building Authority | Victorian School Building Authority \(schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.schoolbuildings.vic.gov.au/building-blocks-grants-improvement).