

# EARLY CHILDHOOD REFORM PLAN



Ready for kinder  
Ready for school  
Ready for life



Education  
and Training

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# MINISTER'S FOREWORD



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## Every Victorian child deserves the best start in life.

All parents want their children to live healthy, happy and fulfilling lives – to be equipped to handle life's challenges, to continue to grow and learn throughout their lives, and to be valued and supported by their community. This is also what we as a Government want for Victoria's children.

By the time a child starts kindergarten, the skills that will help them throughout their lives are already taking shape. At this formative stage of their development, we are taking this opportunity to help shape their life for the better.

In becoming the Education State, we are helping all Victorian children be ready for kinder, ready for school and ready for life. Currently, in Australia, we invest less than many other countries in early childhood. Victoria is addressing this, with nation-leading reforms.

We are investing **\$202.1 million** to help every child thrive.

This investment means more and better support for Victoria's young children when they need it most.

- We are providing **\$81.1 million** for more help for parents to handle the challenges of parenting and for more time with skilled professionals like Maternal and Child Health nurses.
- We are boosting funding to our kindergarten system by **\$108.4 million** to help kindergartens deliver high-quality programs that make the most of every minute that our children are playing and learning.

- We are also helping to ensure all Koorie families provide a strong foundation for their children's learning and development with **\$5.4 million** to provide culturally relevant programs for Koorie parents and children.

- And we are investing **\$7.2 million** to support children with a disability to access early intervention services in preparation for their transition to the NDIS.

Our state is embarking on a ground-breaking and transformative program of reform. We will create an early childhood system that improves our already strong universal services and provides additional, tailored support for those who need it.

This means supporting kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health services to be more accessible, more inclusive and higher-quality.

It also means doing more – much more – for children and families who are struggling. We recognise that some families, for a short time or a long time, need more support.

We will provide funding to kindergartens to help them meet the needs of educationally disadvantaged children. And to better help parents, we will strengthen the crucial Maternal and Child Health Service and parenting supports, and provide more hours of support, for longer, to the families who need it most.

Our reforms include two Australian firsts: new 'school readiness' funding so that kindergartens can give additional support to the children that need it most, and an additional outreach visit where an MCH nurse is concerned that family violence may be occurring.

This will help Victorian children and their families lead better lives. And it will also build Victoria's future workforce and prosperity. We know that providing high-quality support to families and children during the early years pays off now, and in the long run. Australia needs to keep pace with our international competitors, and this plan is the next step in Victoria's leadership in pursuing this goal.

In partnership with local government and the early childhood sector, we have built the best early years supports in Australia. As we celebrate 100 years of the Maternal and Child Health Service, I am proud to reflect on Victoria's strong history of leading the nation with high-quality early childhood services.

But we aspire to be among the best in the world. Over the next 10 years, we will establish a world-class early childhood system that is responsive to children's needs, welcoming to all families, and supportive of all parents and carers.

The Plan has been guided by research and valuable feedback from people who care passionately about getting this right. I would like to thank the many parents, early childhood professionals, experts and stakeholders who have contributed to this Plan since we began consultation. I would also like to acknowledge my Early Childhood Development Expert Panel for the valuable advice they provided to support the development of this Plan.

I am excited to have this chance to work with all of our partners to build a stronger system in the months and years to come. Together, we have the opportunity to leave a legacy that will transform the lives of Victorian children for generations.



**Jenny Mikakos MP**  
*Minister for Families and Children*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Department of Education and Training acknowledges and pays respects to Elders and all Victorian Aboriginal communities. We honour and respect Traditional Owners, past and present, and value the rich culture and history of the First Peoples of this land.

Throughout this document, the term Koorie is used to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Use of the terms Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are retained in the names of programs and initiatives and unless noted otherwise are inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In Victoria's diverse community a wide range of people provide care for children over their lives, including foster parents, grandparents and others. Throughout this document, the terms parent or parents are used to refer to anyone who is acting in a parental role.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This Education State Early Childhood Reform Plan outlines the Victorian Government's vision for early childhood, and the reforms we will undertake to create a higher quality, more equitable and inclusive early childhood system.*

We are undertaking these reforms because the evidence is overwhelming – the early years matter. They matter because the right early childhood education experience will set the course for successful lifelong learning. And they matter because every child – no matter where they live, no matter what their circumstances – will thrive in a safe and supportive home environment.

Over the last two years, we have been working closely with the sector to strengthen early childhood services, and Victoria's early childhood system is performing well. But our international competitors have the edge on us, and the gap between our most advantaged and most disadvantaged children is widening. This Plan is the next step in making Victoria the Education State – the Victorian Government's plan to deliver on its promise of providing excellence and equity, in early childhood, school, and TAFE and training.

These reforms will lift outcomes for all children, and will make an especially big difference to those children and families who need extra support. More hours of higher quality early childhood services together with more supportive home environments and better relationships with parents will support all children to learn and grow, so they are ready for kinder, ready for school and ready for happy and successful lives. They will in turn make an enormous

contribution to our community, to our economy and to the future of our state.

This is the Victorian Government's most significant early childhood investment in many years. It is part of a continuing commitment to value early childhood as a key part of our Education State, and is a major investment in an area that contributes to the success of all the educational experiences that come after it.

During the Education State Early Childhood consultation that informed this Plan, participants outlined their vision for how a truly outstanding early childhood system should look. With this Plan, we are responding with the actions needed to deliver a high-quality and inclusive system for all Victorians, transform the lives of thousands of young children, and create a generational change that will shape the future of our state.

The Victorian Government will take on a greater leadership role, and work in close partnership with all of our local government, sector and community partners as we deliver the reforms under the following four key directions:

- Supporting higher quality services and reducing disadvantage in early education
- Providing more support for parenting
- Making early childhood services more accessible and inclusive
- Building a better system.



## REFORM DIRECTIONS



**SUPPORTING HIGHER  
QUALITY SERVICES AND  
REDUCING DISADVANTAGE  
IN EARLY EDUCATION**



**PROVIDING MORE  
SUPPORT FOR  
PARENTING**

## OUR VISION

**A world-leading early childhood  
education sector that helps all  
children to reach school ready  
to learn**

**Parents have the support they  
need to build loving and  
nurturing relationships in their  
families and be effective first  
educators in their child's life**

## KEY REFORM ACTIONS

### **Changing the way we fund kindergartens so that children who need more support get it**

\$55.3 million in 'school readiness' funding will support kindergartens based on children's level of need

### **Helping all kindergartens deliver high-quality early education**

\$22.8 million will increase support provided to kindergarten services to improve their quality

### **Delivering more early childhood facilities**

An additional \$10 million will fund the development of early childhood facilities co-located at government primary schools

\$1.1 million will reform kindergarten funding for non-government schools to encourage more to offer a kindergarten program

### **Strengthening the Maternal and Child Health Service**

\$4.9 million to improve parents' access to telephone support from the MCH Line

\$37.7 million will expand the Enhanced MCH Service

\$11 million will fund an additional MCH visit to women and children at risk of family violence

\$5.2 million will attract new MCH nurses to the Service and support the development of all MCH nurses

### **Building parenting skills, confidence and stronger connections with community**

\$22.3 million will expand supported playgroups throughout the state and improve connections between First Time Parent Groups and community playgroups

## REFORM DIRECTIONS



### MAKING EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES MORE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE



### BUILDING A BETTER SYSTEM

## OUR VISION

Every child in Victoria can  
access and benefit from early  
childhood services

Victoria has a child and family  
focused early childhood system  
that is connected, flexible,  
accountable, and supports and  
shares best practice

## KEY REFORM ACTIONS

### Improving kindergarten participation for children who need it most

\$6.3 million will meet increasing demand  
for Early Start Kindergarten, so more  
children can access two years of  
kindergarten

\$2.3 million will keep kindergarten places  
open for families most in need

### Supporting children with a disability

\$5 million will expand the Kindergarten  
Inclusion Support program

\$7.2 million will continue to support  
families of young children and the sector  
to prepare for the NDIS

### Supporting Koorie families and children

\$5.4 million will fund culturally relevant  
support for Koorie parents and children

### Strengthening our partnership with local government

The Victorian Government will work with  
local government under the *Supporting  
Children and Families in the Early Years:  
A Compact between the Department of  
Education and Training, Department of  
Health and Human Services and Local  
Government (represented by the Municipal  
Association of Victoria)*

### Making it easier to access services

\$5.5 million will support local government  
to adopt and expand kindergarten  
central enrolment

### Working with the Commonwealth Government

The Victorian Government will continue to  
work with the Commonwealth to establish  
more adequate and durable national  
funding arrangements for early childhood

# THE CASE FOR CHANGE

For Victoria to be the Education State, significant and strategic effort to improve our early childhood system is required.

In recent years, the Victorian Government has made several long-term investments in early childhood services, resulting in Victoria having one of the lowest rates of early years developmental vulnerability in Australia, the strongest quality ratings for early learning providers, and one of the nation's highest rates of participation in early childhood services.

However, we know we need to do more and better to ensure that all children have the chance to succeed.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD MATTERS FOR EVERY CHILD

What happens in early childhood matters for life.

Young children do not spend their days in a classroom, but they are still always learning – as they explore their world, as they interact with adults and other children, and as they play.

The foundations for a child's long-term development are laid in early childhood. In these years, children develop crucial cognitive and emotional skills such as reasoning, problem solving, and how to get along with others.

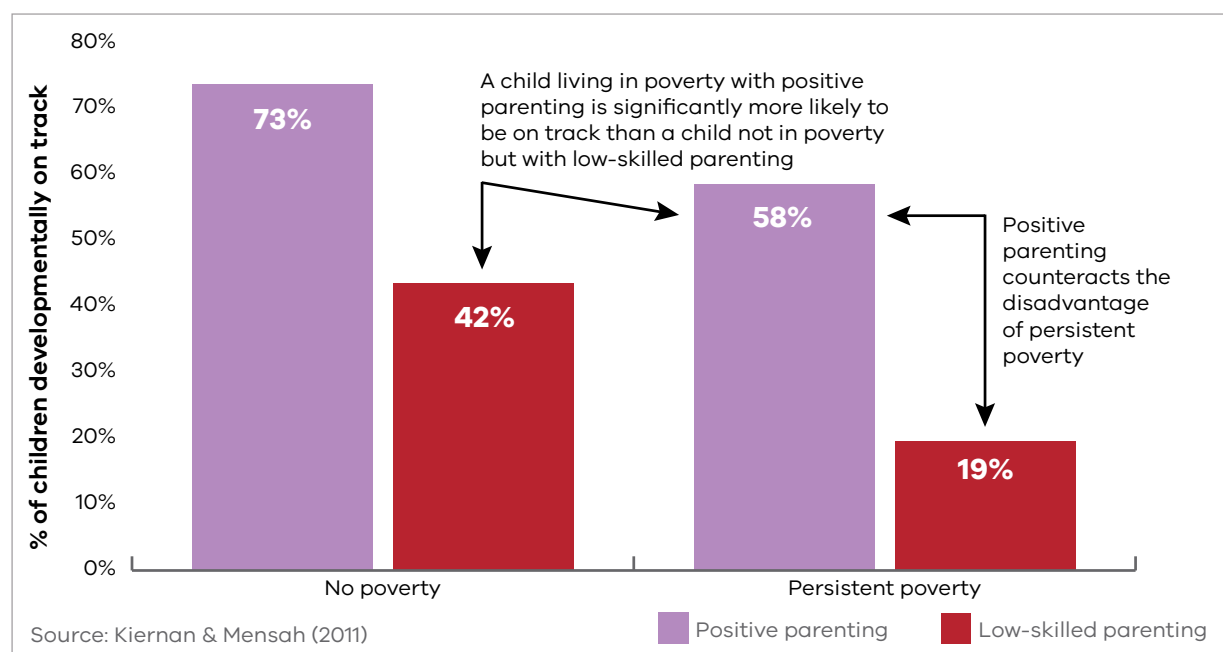
The prime time for the development of vision, emotional control and language is before the age of three, and the prime time for the development of social skills with peers is before the age of six.<sup>1</sup>

The best measure we have of how well our young children are developing, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), recorded little improvement between 2009 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, it showed one in five Victorian children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains. Too many Victorian children are starting school behind.

But we know that quality early childhood services can help children. We also know that parents have an early and lasting effect on their child's development, and that regardless of their circumstances, children experiencing supportive parenting have better outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Growing up in a supportive and nurturing home environment can even counteract the effects of persistent poverty (Figure 1).

And high-quality, play-based learning, such as that in a high-quality kindergarten service, can have a strong positive impact on child development (for more, see the information on the E4Kids study on page 13).

**Figure 1: The impact of parenting on development**





## CHILDREN WHO START BEHIND OFTEN STAY BEHIND

Early childhood is particularly important for children who start from a position of disadvantage. If children start behind, they often stay behind.

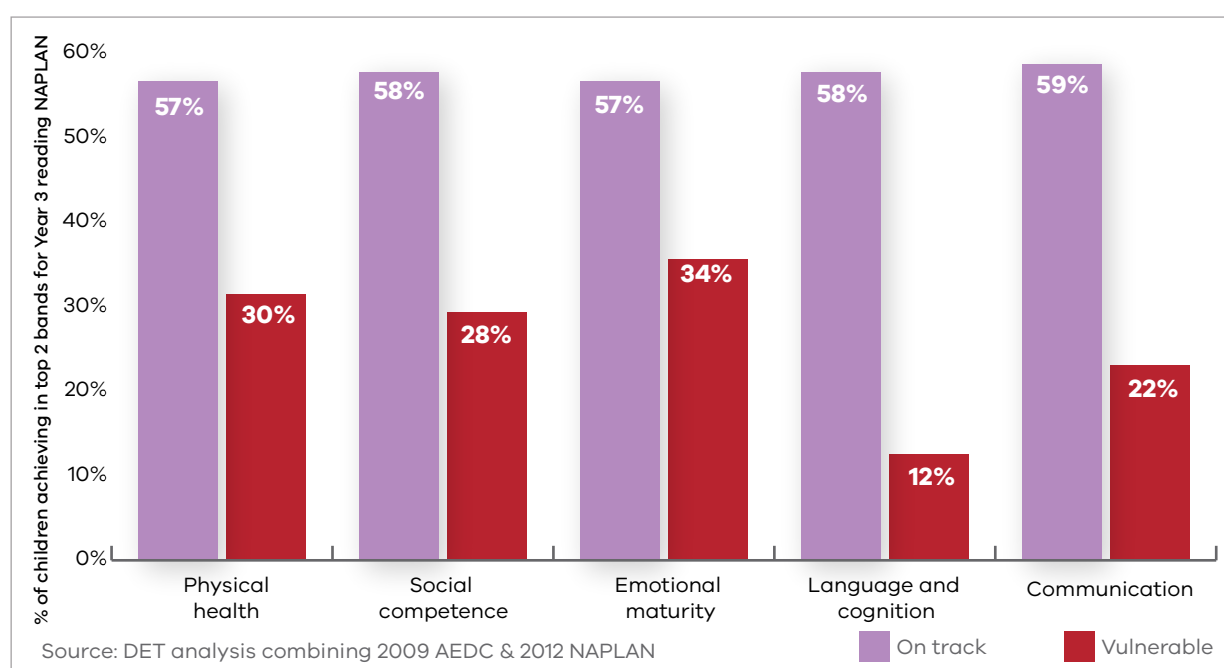
Currently, children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those from the most advantaged areas, and this gap is widening over time.<sup>4</sup>

And once the gap opens, it is very difficult to close. Children vulnerable on even one AEDC domain are half as likely to achieve in the top two NAPLAN reading bands in Year 3 (Figure 2),<sup>5</sup> and even less likely in Year 5.

Disturbingly, aspects of our current system are compounding disadvantage. There are high-quality services in disadvantaged areas, and lower-quality services in advantaged areas. But overall, quality is lower in services located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas and higher in more advantaged areas.<sup>6</sup> So children needing more help are actually getting less.

But it doesn't have to be this way – we know there are things we can do to counteract disadvantage.

**Figure 2: Impact of vulnerability at school entry on NAPLAN scores**



## LONG-TERM BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

In addition to the benefits to individual children, early childhood investment provides benefits for everyone.

Children who have positive early childhood experiences grow up to contribute to a harmonious, healthy and prosperous society.

The number of jobs requiring a combination of both social and cognitive skills is likely to grow.<sup>7</sup> These and other important skills such as creativity, resilience and communication are enhanced through participation in high-quality early childhood education.

Conversely, children who have adverse early childhood experiences can struggle over their whole life. There are strong links between poor development in the early years, and poor outcomes in adult life, which increase the economic burden across a society's health care, criminal justice, and social welfare systems.<sup>8</sup>

Early childhood presents an opportunity to invest early and reap the long-term dividend from this investment, as well as avoiding significant long-term costs to society.

Every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education returns between \$1.50 and nearly \$3, and the return grows to double digits for children from families experiencing disadvantage.<sup>9</sup>

Economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman has shown that early childhood investment is generally less costly than later interventions during school or early adulthood, and more effective in improving the social and economic participation of citizens.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these benefits, however, Australia invests less than 0.5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product in early childhood development, significantly lower than the OECD average.<sup>11</sup> This is why, despite comparing favourably with Australian jurisdictions, Victoria will continue to strive for better outcomes, and why we will continue to work with the Commonwealth Government on more adequate and durable funding arrangements.

The initiatives outlined in this Plan represent Victoria's initial steps to address this challenge, and will mean that more Victorian children will be ready for kinder, ready for school and ready for life.



# SUPPORTING HIGHER QUALITY SERVICES AND REDUCING DISADVANTAGE IN EARLY EDUCATION

## OUR VISION

**A world-leading early childhood education sector that helps all children to reach school ready to learn**

A high-quality kindergarten experience is the gateway to a life full of learning. Kindergarten builds on the foundations laid at home and in other early learning services, and helps children to take the next step along their education journey. It sets children up to be ready for school, and ready for life.

While Victoria has some of the best kindergarten services in Australia, we know that not all children have the same experience. For some children who start kindergarten behind, even the best kindergarten teachers and educators may not have the resources at hand to help them catch up. So we will do more to ensure that all children receive a quality early education.

Only a high-quality early childhood system, which recognises that children need different levels and different kinds of support to learn and develop, will truly give every child the opportunity to thrive.

## E4KIDS: THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-QUALITY PLAY-BASED LEARNING

*E4Kids* is Australia's largest longitudinal research project studying the impact of participation in early childhood education and care programs.<sup>12</sup>

It found that the quality of adult-child interactions is the most significant driver of child development. It highlighted the need to support educators to strengthen their interactions with children during play, and that this aspect of educator-child interaction is most closely associated with cognitive and academic growth.

The study also found that children who need the most support are currently getting the least. It found that the quality of educator-child interactions was consistently lower in services located in low socioeconomic areas, and that this could lead to children in these services being 3-5 months behind their peers in more advantaged neighbourhoods.



The quality of instructional support that children get from their teachers and educators makes all the difference to building the skills they need to succeed at school and in their lives ahead. Educators who interact with children during play and day to day routines, and use every activity as a teachable moment, make the biggest difference to children's learning.

Every child comes to kindergarten with a different story. They come from different home and life experiences, with different family and cultural backgrounds, and at different stages of learning and development. Our kindergartens need to be better supported to work with every child at their level, and according to their needs.

To ensure that every child starts school ready to learn means recognising that some children need additional support to reach the same level as their peers. The way we plan and fund our kindergartens needs to reflect this.

Every child needs access to a quality kindergarten, irrespective of where they live or how much their parents can afford to pay.

This is why we are changing the way we help kindergartens improve the quality of their teaching, with more funding, more support from the Department of Education and Training, and additional resourcing for children from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

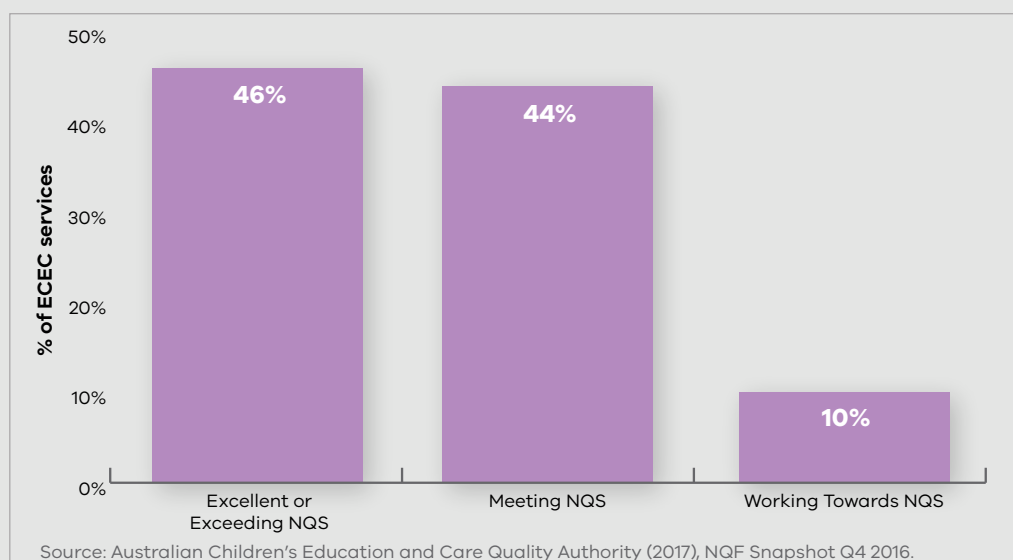
## UNDERSTANDING THE QUALITY OF VICTORIAN KINDERGARTENS

In 2009, the Commonwealth, States and Territories agreed to the National Quality Framework (NQF) – a ground-breaking reform that sets national standards for early childhood education and care (ECEC) service quality, including the importance of continued service improvement.

Victoria played a lead role in the development and introduction of the NQF, and the sector has displayed impressive commitment to its ongoing implementation and enhancing service quality.

Through the NQF, we now have a clear understanding of which services can improve, and in which quality areas. Most Victorian services meet or exceed the National Quality Standard. A significant but declining proportion of services are still working towards the standard (Figure 3).<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 3: Quality ratings for ECEC services with a funded kindergarten program**



## WHAT WE ARE DOING

### Changing the way we fund kindergartens so that children who need more support get it

In an Australian first, we will give additional funding to kindergartens so they can provide more support to the children who need it the most.

The Victorian Government has invested significantly in schools, particularly in needs-based funding to ensure that our schools are ready to support children, regardless of their starting point, and help them to succeed. Now we are investing in the early years to make sure that every child in Victoria arrives at school ready to succeed.

This is a major change to the way kindergartens are funded, where services with a kindergarten program will receive additional 'school readiness' funding based on children's level of need, over and above the existing funding.

This is **a significant boost to kindergarten funding of \$55.3 million over the next four years**. It represents an increase of around 10 per cent of total kindergarten funding.

This funding will enable practical and evidence-based interventions that lift the quality of the education provided, and allow the kindergarten to bring in additional help that will ensure that all children get the most from their kindergarten experience. This could include language and literacy assistance, speech therapy, or more one-on-one learning time for children. It will also allow services to reach out to isolated and disadvantaged families who may need help to support their child's learning.

Kindergarten providers will be able to tailor the additional resourcing specifically to the needs of the children attending. They will be supported by new staff of the Department of Education and Training, to be located across the state, with specialist expertise in early childhood to guide the best teaching and learning improvements.

The Department will work with the sector, Early Years Managers and experts to gather the best approaches, to share good practices, and to develop evidence-based tools and resources for this additional support.

School readiness funding will be introduced into the system in 2019 and will be progressively rolled out over several years to allow time for the sector to prepare for such significant change. We will work with the sector to develop the implementation approach, including how we guide services to build the funding into their planning.

### Helping all kindergartens deliver high-quality early education

The Victorian Government will provide **\$22.8 million to significantly increase the support that is provided to kindergarten services to improve their quality**.

The Department will significantly increase the support it gives to the early childhood sector through new staff with specialist expertise to be based across the state. Similar to the way the Department works with government schools, this additional staff will work with kindergarten providers to understand their needs, respond to their quality improvement priorities and identify appropriate supports.

The Department will work with the sector to develop tools and resources to help services identify evidence-based interventions and improve service quality. These could include professional development programs, activities, and demonstrations of best practice teaching strategies that improve outcomes for children.

Included in this investment is **\$4.6 million for quality improvement grants** that will ensure that the kindergarten services that need the most support (for example, as assessed against the National Quality Standard) will be able to access intensive coaching, training and advice to improve their professional practice and outcomes for children.

### Delivering more early childhood facilities

The Victorian Government will invest **\$10 million to fund the development of early childhood facilities to be co-located at government primary schools.** This is in addition to the \$60 million already allocated for early childhood infrastructure between 2015 and 2018.

Starting school is a major transition for children and their families. Having early childhood facilities on school sites makes it easier for families to access early childhood facilities and provides children with a more stable transition from kindergarten to school.

We will work with local government to identify the best sites for this investment, and explore options to create integrated children's centres, which bring together a range of education, care, health and support services.

We are also allocating an additional **\$1.1 million to reform funding for non-government schools to encourage more to offer a kindergarten program, particularly in low socioeconomic areas.**

Kindergarten services run by non-government schools (including Catholic schools) are currently funded at a lower rate than other services, regardless of their socioeconomic status. This funding will help meet high demand for kindergarten programs in some areas.

These changes will start in 2019, following consultation with the sector.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Early language development has important implications for later achievement. Children who have low cognitive and language skills early in life tend to remain below the average for their age, with the gap between them and their peers widening over time.<sup>14</sup> Children who are exposed to fewer words in the first four years of life have a smaller and slower-growing vocabulary.<sup>15</sup> However, the quality of the language a child is exposed to is even more important than the quantity of language.

Children need warm, responsive and stimulating interactions with caring adults to give them a strong foundation in language that underpins their later learning. We are working on ways to better support early language development. *Every Toddler Talking* is a research trial taking place in early childhood education and care services, in which educators and speech pathologists are working together to find out more about how we can best support early language development.





## EXISTING REFORM INITIATIVES

The Victorian Government is already investing in supporting higher quality services and improving outcomes for children:

- The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) provides guidance for early childhood professionals to work more effectively with children, families and other professionals. It underpins educational guidelines and resources for all early childhood professionals. The VEYLDF was updated in 2016 to focus on better responding to children and families experiencing vulnerability.
- Beginning in 2016, the Victorian Government has committed to an investment of up to \$83.7 million to improve educator-to-child ratios. Lowering the ratio from 1:15 to 1:11 supports higher quality kindergarten programs and enables more individualised care and attention for children.
- *The Transition: A Positive Start to School* initiative is designed to help make the move to school a positive experience for every child and family. Successful transitions occur when children, families and early childhood professionals develop positive and supportive relationships to help those involved to feel valued, included and respected.
- The *Excellence in Teacher Education Reforms* announced in November 2016 will improve the quality of early childhood teaching through higher standards for selection into dual early childhood and primary teaching courses, improvements to course quality, and strengthened induction and mentoring for beginning teachers.
- The Victorian Government has committed \$60 million in early years infrastructure between 2015 and 2018, including \$10 million to address demand in high growth areas. In the first two years of this investment alone, an estimated 2500 additional kindergarten places have been created.
- The Victorian Government is providing Respectful Relationships Professional Learning to 4,000 early childhood educators in funded kindergarten programs. Building the foundations for respectful relationships starts in early childhood and can play a role in preventing family violence in future generations.

# PROVIDING MORE SUPPORT FOR PARENTING

## OUR VISION

**Parents have the support they need to build loving and nurturing relationships in their families and be effective first educators in their child's life**

Parents are their child's first teacher, and their actions and behaviours have an early, strong and lasting impact on their child's learning and development.

Just as every child is unique, so too is every parent. And every parent finds their role challenging at times. All parents encounter difficulties at one time or another – with breastfeeding or fussy eating, sleeping and settling or with managing toddler behaviours. This is a normal part of raising children, and effective parenting skills don't always come naturally – but they can be learned. Parents can be supported to develop their parenting skills and grow their confidence.

We want parents to know that they are not alone, there is help available, and that wanting help is normal. By helping parents to tap into knowledge and supports available to them, we can help them to grow more confident in their role as their child's first teacher.

In these critical formative years, supporting parents helps their children succeed. When children feel safe, they feel confident to explore and learn. Children build that confidence from strong and caring relationships with parents and carers who are responsive to their needs.

Warm, responsive parenting can also close the disadvantage gap. A child living in poverty has better developmental outcomes with supportive parenting than a child who does not live in poverty but experiences low-skilled parenting.<sup>16</sup>

## WHAT WE ARE DOING

For these reasons, we are improving the support available for parents when their children are very young.

### Strengthening the Maternal and Child Health Service

The Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Service has contact with all Victorian children from birth through ten Key Ages and Stages parent and child consultations. At each consultation, an MCH nurse assesses the mother's wellbeing and child's development, and provides support – such as parenting advice, breastfeeding advice, help to manage post-natal depression, counselling, or referral to more specialist services. The final visit is at three and a half years, with the ten visits serving as important checks that a child's physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development is on track. The MCH Service is therefore uniquely positioned to provide early support to all families, and identify those who need extra assistance.

It is important that all parents have easy access to reliable, evidence-based information whenever they need it. The MCH Line is a very popular telephone service for Victorian families with children up to school age. Through the MCH Line, parents can seek information, support and guidance from MCH nurses regarding issues including child health, nutrition, breastfeeding, maternal and family health and parenting.



The Victorian Government is investing **\$4.9 million to answer an additional 20,000 calls to the MCH Line each year, to improve parents' access to reliable, evidence-based information and advice** from MCH nurses, 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Sometimes, families will need more support in person. This may only be for a short period, as families deal with particular parenting challenges. And sometimes families will experience periods of greater stress as a result of issues such as social isolation, family violence, mental illness or family breakdown. Together with the approach outlined in the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children (2016)*, these reforms are part of an integrated plan to intervene early and effectively to help families overcome these serious issues, and build a connected system of support across the Victorian service system.

Enhanced MCH is a targeted service for families who need some additional help, and may be at risk of poor outcomes due to factors like parent-infant attachment concerns, premature or low birth weight babies, children with a disability, parental mental health issues or family violence. Currently, the Enhanced MCH Service provides additional support for families who need it until their child turns one, particularly those who are experiencing multiple challenges. As issues can affect children and their families at any time after birth, we are investing **\$37.7 million to expand the Enhanced MCH Service**. Enhanced MCH will be expanded to support 15 per cent of Victorian families with children from birth to three years of age. When fully implemented, this will provide about 37,000 families who are struggling with 20 hours of support across their child's first three years, in addition to the Universal MCH Service's ten Key Ages and Stages consultations.

This expansion will commence in 2018, and be progressively rolled out to ensure that sufficient MCH nurses are in place to support families. The expansion will be guided by the work currently underway to revise and strengthen the Enhanced MCH Service Guidelines, as well as develop new guidelines for the Universal MCH Service and for the MCH Line.

## THE ROLE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES IN THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

*The Royal Commission into Family Violence* highlighted the impact of family violence on children and families, and that early childhood services have a crucial role to play in identifying, responding to and preventing family violence. Early childhood services are uniquely placed to build parental capacity, foster respectful relationships, undertake population screening to identify family violence risk, and link families into more specialist services.

The Royal Commission also noted that pregnancy and the early post-natal period are times of adjustment and change, when the risk of violence is elevated. Other evidence shows that one in five women experience family violence in the 12 months after giving birth.<sup>17</sup> MCH services are uniquely placed to identify women and children experiencing family violence during this period, to support them and refer them to specialist support services.



Too often, women and children need extra support from MCH services because family violence is occurring, or at risk of occurring, in their home. Pregnancy and the early post-natal period is a time of heightened family violence risk, with many new mothers experiencing harm. In an Australian first, **the Victorian Government will invest \$11 million in an additional MCH visit for those women and children who are at risk of, or are experiencing, family violence.** This funding will support an additional visit to around 12,000 families.

MCH nurses will have the flexibility to undertake the additional visit in an appropriate location, such as the woman's home, or another convenient and safe place such as an early learning centre. MCH nurses will also be able to choose to extend an existing visit, and will use their clinical judgement in assessing family violence risk and referring women to specialist supports. To build on their existing skills, MCH nurses will also receive tailored training to support them in working with women and children at risk of, or experiencing, family violence. Workforce training and additional visits will commence later in 2017.

To enable these reforms and improve the overall MCH Service, the Victorian Government will invest **\$5.2 million to attract new MCH nurses into the Service, including through scholarships, and support the ongoing professional development of all MCH nurses.** This will address anticipated workforce attrition, ensure enough MCH nurses are available to deliver the service expansion, and increase the diversity of the MCH workforce. In addition, targeted professional development will be provided to help MCH nurses to deal with changing family types, increased complexity of need, and issues such as families who have experienced trauma.

### **Building parenting skills, confidence and stronger connections with community**

Playgroups provide an early opportunity for children to learn through play, and for parents to spend time with their children in a fun environment and build connections and support each other. Supported playgroups provide additional support for parents who need it, and help children with their speech and cognitive development, social skills, emotional resilience and general behaviour.

The Victorian Government is investing **\$22.3 million to roll out supported playgroups across Victoria**, giving parents who need extra support access to evidence-based playgroups run by trained facilitators. Expanding supported playgroups across the state will mean that more than 6,000 additional families will be able to benefit from approximately 750 additional supported playgroups.

First Time Parents Groups support new parents to learn skills and develop confidence to take on their role, and decrease the isolation that new parents can experience. We will provide funding to help improve the connections between these Groups and community playgroups, so parents continue to experience this support and connection.





## EXISTING REFORM INITIATIVES

The Victorian Government is already investing in supporting parents:

- In the 2016/17 Budget, the Victorian Government invested more than \$133 million to continue to provide a world-class MCH Service to a growing population, in partnership with local government.
- Also in the 2016/17 Budget, the Victorian Government invested in creating a new intensive, early support service for families. MCH nurses, social workers, and other professionals will help parents to create a supportive home environment and develop confidence in their parenting skills. This service will be available in locations across Victoria and will support early years services to work more closely together. It builds on successful existing initiatives such as Cradle to Kinder, Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies and right@home. As a first step, the Victorian Government has invested in the expansion of these programs, with Cradle to Kinder now expanded to provide services state-wide.
- The Victorian Government is supporting Playgroups Victoria, including \$100,000 to support the Great Start Community Playgroup Grant Fund to support community playgroups to grow, particularly in areas lacking vital services.

# MAKING EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES MORE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE

## OUR VISION

### **Every child in Victoria can access and benefit from early childhood services**

An accessible, inclusive early childhood system will help all children to reach their full potential.

For Victoria to build the best early childhood system we need to recognise that some families need different kinds of support.

Not all families are able to easily enjoy the benefits of our early childhood services. Some families find the system difficult to navigate, or unable to meet their needs. Others find services unwelcoming or lacking in cultural awareness and sensitivity. Some children have additional challenges, which mean they cannot meaningfully participate in services without assistance and support.

Whatever their needs, all children should be able to benefit fully from early childhood services available to them.

The Victorian Government will make early childhood services accessible to all children and families, especially those who will benefit from them the most.

We will support early childhood services to reach out to families and provide inclusive supports to all children, whatever their background or circumstances. Services will work in partnership with parents and the community, involving them in decision-making to best meet the needs of their child.

## WHAT WE ARE DOING

To make Victoria the Education State, we will provide services that are inclusive and welcoming for all children and families, and capable of addressing each child and family's needs.

### **Improving kindergarten participation for children who need it most**

While all children benefit from access to high-quality kindergarten, some children have more to gain than others. This is why the Victorian Government is working to make kindergarten services more accessible.

Starting kindergarten at three years of age can have profound benefits for children. There is compelling evidence of the benefit of two years of kindergarten compared to one year, especially for children most likely to be developmentally vulnerable.<sup>18</sup>

This is why we are investing an additional **\$6.3 million over the next two years to meet increasing demand for the Early Start Kindergarten program**, to offer two years of free kindergarten to more Koorie children and more children known to child protection.

This program gives children an extended period of structured, intentional teaching that helps them start school on track. Uptake of the program has continued to grow, increasing by 127 per cent over the past four years.





This increased participation is a direct result of the hard work of our partners in the community, local government and the early childhood sector, and their efforts to get more children participating in kindergarten.

Following on from the successful pilot in 2016, the Victorian Government is spending **\$2.3 million to make Pre-Purchased Places a permanent part of the kindergarten system.**

Children risk missing out on the benefits of kindergarten if their families miss enrolment deadlines. To address this, the Pre-Purchased Places program sets aside kindergarten spots for children most in need, so they can enrol even after deadlines have passed, at no cost to the parent or carer. This includes Koorie children, children known to child protection and refugees.

This initiative will benefit around 600 children each year, all of whom may have otherwise missed out on a kindergarten place.

### **Supporting children with a disability**

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring children with a disability have access to, and can fully participate in, high-quality early years services and supports. Our reforms will allow more children with disabilities to access kindergarten, and support children with a disability and their families in the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Some children simply cannot attend kindergarten without additional support. The Kindergarten Inclusion Support program allows children with a range of disabilities, including severe disabilities, to experience and benefit from kindergarten the same as other children their own age.

The Victorian Government is providing an additional **\$5 million to expand the Kindergarten Inclusion Support program to ensure more children with disabilities can enjoy a quality kindergarten experience.**

## **KINDERGARTEN INCLUSION SUPPORT**

Kindergarten Inclusion Support allows children with disabilities, high support needs and/or complex medical needs to be engaged and participate in all aspects of kindergarten life on the same basis as their peers.

The program provides support to kindergarten services to build their capacity and ensure that children who might otherwise miss out on the social, emotional and educational benefits of kindergarten can attend and participate in a meaningful way. Support may include staff training, additional staffing, minor building modifications or access to specialist expertise.

It supports the attendance of children who would not be able to attend kindergarten without additional support, and also ensures that when children do attend, they are able to fully benefit from the kindergarten program.

Victoria's Early Childhood Intervention Services have begun to transition to the NDIS. Throughout the transition, the Victorian Government is providing funding of **\$7.2 million to continue to support the families of young children and the sector to be NDIS-ready.**

To help families during the transition period, the Victorian Government will invest in reducing the number of children waiting for supports as we transition from the state system to the NDIS. We will support the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Agency's Early Childhood Early Intervention model and will share expertise and knowledge with Early Childhood Partners as they are appointed.

### Supporting Koorie families and children

Koorie culture is a protective factor that supports Koorie learners to be confident. Koorie families are also more likely to access services, including playgroups, when they feel culturally supported and have an existing relationship with the provider.

In recognition of this, the Victorian Government is working with Koorie communities to provide a strong foundation for children's learning and development by providing funding of **\$5.4 million to support Koorie parents and children**.

The *Koorie Families as First Educators* program will be delivered across five sites by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and will provide Koorie families with access to high-quality, culturally relevant parenting support programs in communities with high rates of children in out-of-home care and limited access to parenting support.

Supported playgroups help parents to build their confidence and skills, support networks, and the home learning environment, and help children with their speech and cognitive development, social skills, emotional resilience and general behaviour. In recognition of the benefits of this evidence-based program, the Victorian Government will fund new Koorie supported playgroups across four sites in areas of high need.

These initiatives support *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*. Marrung is a plan to ensure that all Koorie Victorians achieve their learning aspirations and realise the full benefits of the Education State reforms across early childhood, schools and further education. In particular, these initiatives support Marrung actions relating to excellence in teaching, learning and development in early childhood. All Marrung initiatives have been developed, and are being implemented, in partnership with the Aboriginal community, consistent with the Victorian Government commitment to Aboriginal self-determination.

## EXISTING REFORM INITIATIVES

The Victorian Government is already investing to create accessible early childhood services:

- In 2016, the Victorian Government piloted Pre-Purchased Places to help eligible children enrol in kindergarten at any time of the year.

To reflect the importance of services being respectful of culture, the Victorian Government is investing in initiatives to support the Koorie community:

- As part of *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* and *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*, the Victorian Government has invested \$1.6 million over two years to work with Koorie communities to co-design an MCH service delivery model to deliver more culturally responsive and high-quality services, through both Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and current service providers.
- Launched in 2015, the Koorie Kids Shine at Kindergarten campaign aims to support Koorie children's engagement in learning both in three- and four-year-old kindergarten by raising awareness about the importance of early education for Koorie children.

The Victorian Government is also investing in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse communities:

- A suite of MCH resources translated into the top ten Victorian languages other than English was launched in March 2017. The resources include information on child restraints, water safety, outdoor safety, safe sleeping, sun safety, and communicating with young children, and are available in hard copy for parents at MCH visits and online through the Department of Education and Training's website.
- The Victorian Government funds FKA Children's Services, a community organisation, to provide advice and resources to kindergarten services to improve the participation and inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse children.

# BUILDING A BETTER SYSTEM

## OUR VISION

**Victoria has a child and family focused early childhood system that is connected, flexible, accountable, and supports and shares best practice**

We want an early childhood system that better supports families and children to access what they need, when they need it; better facilitates easy transitions between services; and that continuously seeks and shares improvement. This would make a sustained positive impact on children and their families.

The early childhood system in Victoria is complex, with no single funder or provider responsible for service availability and quality, or for children's outcomes.

Our system relies on partnerships between three levels of government and many service providers. There is considerable goodwill, but there are still challenges. Services can be fragmented and difficult to navigate; information on families and children, and how best to help them, is not always shared; and local problems can go without local solutions.

Many small providers create great diversity and community involvement in the sector. However, without more support, small services can lack the scale to dedicate effort to the sustained connections and quality improvement we know are vital to helping children and families.

The Victorian Government is building a better system, because it will make a real difference to Victorian children and families.

A better system will make life simpler for families, making it easier to access

services, and smoothing transitions between services. It will have all levels of government pulling in the same direction, with strong accountability, but enough flexibility for communities to develop solutions to meet local needs. And it will deliver better services, and therefore better outcomes, through a focus on quality and continuous improvement.

## WHAT WE ARE DOING

The Victorian Government will take on a clear system leadership role and work with our partners – with local government, with the Commonwealth Government and with the sector – to signal direction, embed continuous improvement and improve coordination, collaboration, information sharing and accountability across the system.

### **Strengthening our partnership with local government**

An essential element of a better early childhood system is strengthening how state and local governments work together.

*Supporting Children and Families in the Early Years: A Compact between the Department of Education and Training, Department of Health and Human Services and Local Government (represented by the Municipal Association of Victoria)* has been agreed to formalise a closer working relationship to lift outcomes for young children and families.





The Compact is a commitment by the three parties to work together in new ways to improve joint planning, coordination and information sharing to better support children and families wherever they live. It sets out a clear, shared view of the role of state and local government, recognising the key role local government plays in supporting and responding to the needs of children and families at the local level.

Areas for focus under the Compact include:

- Better support for vulnerable children and families by improving information sharing so that children in out-of-home care can better access early years services
- Supporting Victoria's MCH nurses to continue to deliver high-quality services in the expanded MCH Service through additional training and updated Service Guidelines (see page 19)
- Working together at the local level to better plan for the long term provision of kindergarten so that all children can access services no matter where they live
- Working with local government to expand central enrolment processes to make it easier for children experiencing vulnerability to participate in kindergarten.

Under the Compact, all parties have committed to working together in new ways to ensure the needs of children, families and their local communities inform the delivery of early years services.

### **Making it easier to access services**

Central enrolment provides a single point for families to apply for multiple kindergarten services in a local government area, helping families secure a place that meets their needs. It also allows local governments to establish closer links between MCH services and kindergartens, to improve the early identification of children who need more support.

Central enrolment schemes currently operate in some local government areas but not all. The Government will invest **\$5.5 million to support more local governments to adopt, expand and enhance central enrolment for kindergarten services.**

### **Working with the Commonwealth Government**

The Commonwealth plays an important funding role in early childhood services, but could do more to realise the potential of its contribution.

The Commonwealth's funding arrangements value parental workforce participation over children's early learning. Both quality early learning and convenience for families to participate in work are important goals – and we could deliver both objectives in Victoria by taking a more strategic approach to early childhood. Investing in the early years will support the kind of healthy, engaged and innovative future workforce that the nation needs to prosper as a knowledge economy.

Victoria will continue to work with the Commonwealth to achieve:

- More adequate and durable national funding arrangements for kindergarten, proper regulation of early childhood education and care, and professional development of its workforce (such as through a National Agreement)
- Better recognition of the value of early learning
- Access to childcare for families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage so that benefits of quality childcare (such as early learning and respite for parents) are maintained.

## EXISTING REFORM INITIATIVES

The Victorian Government is already working to build a better system:

- The *Early Years Management Policy Framework*, introduced in 2016, supports organisations that manage community-based kindergarten services and complementary early years services to provide more sustainable, integrated and responsive early learning programs. The new framework articulates a clearer leadership role for service providers in working with parents and communities to improve outcomes for children.
- The Best Start Program aims to improve outcomes for children aged 0-8 through collaborative, place-based work in 30 communities across Victoria. A new approach, introduced in 2016, develops and applies clearer, more measurable and more evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes for Koorie children and children experiencing vulnerability.



# NEXT STEPS – DELIVERING THE VISION

This Plan outlines the Victorian Government's long-term vision and initial reforms to transform Victoria's early childhood services into a higher quality, more equitable and inclusive system, to ensure all Victorian children are ready for kinder, ready for school, and ready to lead healthy, happy and fulfilling lives.

This is a 10-year plan, and sets forth significant reforms. We will begin immediately, and funding for many initiatives will start in July 2017. It will take time to establish a world-class early childhood system, and it is important we take the time to do it properly.

Measuring our achievements will be important. In the future, we will develop measures that track our progress towards improving outcomes for Victoria's children and families.

In delivering this vision, we will work closely with all of our government, sector and community partners.

Together, we will transform the lives of generations of young Victorians.

**For more information on the Early Childhood Reform Plan visit:**

[www.education.vic.gov.au/ecreform](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/ecreform)

## THANK YOU

The Minister's Early Childhood Expert Panel provided valuable insight, advice and expertise to support the development of this Plan. This contribution has been extremely helpful and beneficial for the reforms in this Plan.

## MINISTER'S EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT EXPERT PANEL MEMBERS

- Professor Kerry Arabena
- Mr Warren Cann
- Dr Gordon Cleveland
- Associate Professor Lisa Gold
- Professor Sharon Goldfeld
- Professor Susan Grieshaber
- Professor Joce Nuttall
- Professor Iram Siraj
- Professor Collette Tayler
- Professor Elizabeth Waters

*The Minister for Families and Children would like to particularly acknowledge the contribution of Professor Elizabeth Waters, who passed away in October 2015.*

*Professor Waters was a renowned leader in public health who made a lasting contribution to the field – both in Australia and overseas – through her passion and commitment to justice, equity and improving the lives of children. Even in her short time as a member of the Minister's Early Childhood Development Expert Panel, she made a valued contribution to this Plan.*

The Minister's MCH Reference Group and the Department's Early Childhood Development Advisory Group also provided valuable insights that informed the Plan.



# SUMMARY OF KEY REFORM ACTIONS

KEY REFORM ACTION	SUMMARY	FUNDING
<b>Supporting higher quality services and reducing disadvantage in early education</b>		
School readiness funding	Providing additional resourcing for kindergartens based on children's level of need.	\$55.3 million
Delivering high-quality early education	Increasing support for all services with a kindergarten program to improve their quality.	\$22.8 million
Delivering more early childhood facilities	Building early childhood facilities co-located at government primary schools.	\$10 million
	Encouraging more non-government schools to offer kindergarten.	\$1.1 million
<b>Providing more support for parenting</b>		
Maternal and Child Health Service	Improving access to reliable, evidence-based parenting information by responding to MCH Line demand.	\$4.9 million
	Expanding access to the Enhanced MCH Service to 15 per cent of families until their child turns three.	\$37.7 million
	Providing an additional MCH visit for women and children experiencing, or at risk of, family violence.	\$11 million
	Attracting new MCH nurses to the Service, including through scholarships, and providing professional development for all MCH nurses.	\$5.2 million
Parenting skills and confidence	Expanding supported playgroups across the state, and improving connections between First Time Parent Groups and community playgroups.	\$22.3 million
<b>Making early childhood services more accessible and inclusive</b>		
Kindergarten participation	Meeting increasing demand for Early Start Kindergarten to enable access to three-year-old kindergarten for Koorie children and children known to child protection.	\$6.3 million
	Making kindergarten more accessible for families most in need by making places available to them after enrolments have closed.	\$2.3 million
Supporting children with a disability	Expanding the Kindergarten Inclusion Support program so that more children with a disability can participate in kindergarten.	\$5 million
	Continuing to support children with a disability and their families and the sector to prepare for the NDIS.	\$7.2 million
Support for Koorie families	Working with Koorie communities to provide culturally relevant programs for Koorie parents and children.	\$5.4 million
<b>Building a better system</b>		
Partnership with local government	Working with the Department of Health and Human Services and local government under the <i>Supporting Children and Families in the Early Years: A Compact between the Department of Education and Training, Department of Health and Human Services and Local Government (represented by the Municipal Association of Victoria)</i> .	N/A
Central enrolment	Supporting local governments to adopt, expand and enhance kindergarten central enrolment for kindergarten services.	\$5.5 million
Working with the Commonwealth Government	Working with the Commonwealth to establish more adequate and durable national funding arrangements and better recognise the value of early learning.	N/A
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>\$202.1 million</b>

Figures in this table are subject to rounding (to the nearest one hundred thousand) and may not add up to the total.



## ENDNOTES

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