

# Early Start Kindergarten

## Information for maternal and child health professionals

Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) is a grant funded by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) that provides eligible three-year-old children with access to up to 15 hours of free or low cost kindergarten per week, including in areas with funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.

This grant is available in both long day care and sessional services where the kindergarten program is delivered by a qualified teacher. A child can be placed in a Three-Year-Old Kindergarten program, a mixed age program or where early start enrolments are incorporated into a four-year-old program.

## Children eligible for Early Start Kindergarten

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

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

A child from a refugee or asylum seeker background is eligible if they or their parent or guardian:

- hold a refugee or humanitarian visa, or
- are on a bridging visa and are currently applying for a refugee or humanitarian visa.

For families and children who have been impacted by a refugee or asylum seeker experience or an experience similar to a refugee and asylum seeker, but do not hold a refugee or humanitarian visa, please contact your local Department office to discuss possible exemptions. Further information about eligible visas can be found by visiting [Early Start Kindergarten for Professionals](#).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children can be referred by maternal and child health professionals, parents, carers, Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO) or other practitioners. No further action or information is required to determine their eligibility.

A child known to Child Protection means any child or family who has a history of involvement with Child Protection. Notification of eligibility can be provided to an early childhood service providing a funded kindergarten program based on the knowledge you have of the family's background. This can be done verbally or submitted in writing.

## Early Start Kindergarten is available to all eligible children during funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten roll-out

The implementation of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten will change the levels of kindergarten available for three-year-olds across Victoria. You can find out more about Three-Year-Old Kindergarten at [vic.gov.au/kinder](http://vic.gov.au/kinder).

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

There is no change to how ESK is administered during the roll-out of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.

## When to promote Early Start Kindergarten

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

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

## How to access Early Start Kindergarten

1. Identify an eligible child and talk with the family to determine any interest in connecting to a service. For children with birthdays between 1 January and 30 April, the discussion should consider the families' views about which year they intend the child to start school and the year the child will start kindergarten through ESK.
2. Work with the family to identify a service by contacting the local council, or visiting [Find a Service](#) on the Department's website.
3. The parent or carer enrolls the child at the kindergarten (assisted by the Maternal and Child Health nurse or kindergarten teacher). The kindergarten will then complete an ESK funding application and submit it to the Department.

## Finding a kindergarten service

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

When supporting a family to locate a kindergarten service, it is important to find a high-quality kindergarten program delivered by a degree-qualified teacher, and a service where the family can maintain regular participation. A service's quality rating can be accessed by visiting the [Starting Blocks website](#).

High-quality programs create a strong learning environment that positively impacts a child's short and long-term development, especially those experiencing disadvantage, whereas medium and low-quality programs have a low or negative impact.

## Sharing information

Information should be shared with the child's kindergarten where it is relevant to their learning and development and where it is in the child's best interest. This may include:

- the outcome of Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) and Brigance assessments
- the child's eligibility for ESK
- relevant information about a child's developmental needs
- other information about the child that can help educators support the child and encourage their sustained participation in kindergarten.

## Interpreter service

Interpreting services are available to help culturally and linguistically diverse families understand more about ESK or kindergarten. Phone (03) 9280 1955 or email [bookings@languageloop.com.au](mailto:bookings@languageloop.com.au) for assistance.

## Regional office contacts

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

**North East Victoria** 1300 333 231

**North West Victoria** 1300 338 691

**South East Victoria** 1300 338 738

**South West Victoria** 1300 333 232

For a list of the Department's regional offices visit the [contact webpage](#).

More information about ESK can be found by visiting [Early Start Kindergarten for Professionals](#).