



# EARLY START KINDERGARTEN INFORMATION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES

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

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have an important role to play in engaging with vulnerable children and families and in ensuring that high quality learning is accessible.

The Department of Education and Training provides Early Start Kindergarten funding to support children to access free or low cost kindergarten in the two years before school

## EARLY START KINDERGARTEN

Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) provides eligible three year old children with access to up to 15 hours of kindergarten per week (or 600 hours per year) for free. This grant is available in all settings where the kindergarten program is delivered by a qualified teacher, including in a three year old kindergarten program, a mixed age program or where Early Start enrolments are incorporated into a four year old program.

## ELIGIBILITY

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

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

A child's eligibility can be determined in discussion with a parent or carer. Referrals can be made directly to services by Child Protection, family services professionals or Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO).

## REQUIREMENTS FOR SERVICES

Service providers must offer children eligible for ESK a kindergarten program free of charge, and are strongly encouraged to waive any refundable deposit. It is important that a requirement for a deposit does not present a financial barrier to families seeking to access an ESK place.

When the kindergarten program is provided in a long day care setting, the Early Start Kindergarten grant can be used in conjunction with Child Care Benefit and Special Child Care Benefit.



In integrated long day care settings, families of children eligible for ESK may be required to pay fees for additional child care hours outside the kindergarten program. In such cases, service providers:

- should ensure that any fees normally charged for additional hours do not present a financial barrier to families seeking access to ESK
- are encouraged to explore all avenues for funding to reduce fees, including Special Child Care Benefit
- are encouraged, where possible, to waive fees and provide all hours free of charge to children eligible for ESK
- must inform families that they may be able to access 15 hours per week/600 hours per year for free at another service.

### **ROLE OF SERVICES IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

All ECEC services are encouraged to have a priority of access policy to assist children at risk of disadvantage to access kindergarten programs.

ECEC services should consider how places for children who access ESK can be included in this policy.

Services are urged to seek parental permission to share information as part of enrolment from the following sources:

- Maternal and Child Health Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS)
- Brigance assessments
- referrals from the Key Ages and Stages visits.

This will help inform individualised planning and assist with early access to additional resources such as Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS).

### **REFERRAL PROCESS FOR EARLY START KINDERGARTEN**





## HOW TO APPLY

Service providers submit an application for ESK using the Kindergarten Information Management (KIM) system. The ESK application should be completed in consultation with, and on behalf of, the family.

Service providers can apply for ESK funding at any time during the calendar year in which the child is enrolled. However, it is strongly encouraged that applications are submitted prior to the end of term one.

For detailed instructions about how to add an ESK enrolment in KIM, refer to the Quick Reference Guide: *How to add, edit or remove an Early Start enrolment* which is available for download from KIM or the Department's website:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/kinderim.aspx>

Service providers not in receipt of kindergarten per capita grants and not registered to use the KIM system should contact the appropriate Departmental regional office to apply for ESK.

## HOW FUNDING WORKS

On approval, service providers are paid the ESK grant for each eligible child at the standard, rural or small rural rate.

ESK grants are paid as an annual one-off payment that covers the whole year, regardless of the child's enrolment or cease date.

The full grant rate is paid for eligible children who attend 15 hours per week. The grant is paid on a pro rata basis for children attending fewer hours, however if the pro rata rate does not cover the fee that the service would normally charge, the grant rate will be adjusted to match the fee normally charged (capped at the full grant rate amount).

To apply for ESK, services must meet the relevant funding criteria and operational requirements outlined in the *Kindergarten Funding Guide*.

## EARLY START KINDERGARTEN EXTENSION GRANT

The Early Start Kindergarten extension grant is available for children who have accessed ESK as a three year old but are ineligible for the kindergarten fee subsidy in the year before school. The ESK extension grant enables an eligible child to attend a funded kindergarten program free of charge or at minimal cost in the year before school.

## INTERPRETER SERVICE

The Department provides an interpreter line so that services can help non-English speaking families understand more about kindergarten programs and ESK. To find out how to access the interpreter service, consult the Department website or current *Kindergarten Funding Guide*.



## MORE INFORMATION

Staff in Departmental regional offices can assist services with any queries about ESK. Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) can assist with questions about Aboriginal Early Start.

ESK information for families is available at:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/kindergarten/Pages/earlystart.aspx>

For more information for service providers about kindergarten funding, including ESK, refer to the current *Kindergarten Funding Guide*:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/kinderfundingcriteria.aspx>

## REGIONAL OFFICE CONTACTS

Regional Office	Location	Switchboard
North-Eastern Victoria	Benalla	03 8392 9500
	Glen Waverley	03 8392 9300
North-Western Victoria	Bendigo	03 5440 3111
	Coburg	03 9488 9488
South-Eastern Victoria	Dandenong	03 8765 5600
	Moe	03 5127 0400
South-Western Victoria	Ballarat	03 5337 8444
	Geelong	03 5225 1000

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