

Early Start Kindergarten

Information for early childhood education and care services

Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) is a grant funded by the Department of Education and Training (the Department) that provides eligible three-year-old children 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.

Who is eligible?

The ESK grant is available for children who are:

- three years old by 30 April in the year they are enrolled
- either:
 - from a refugee or asylum seeker background
 - Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
 - known to Child Protection.
- enrolled in a kindergarten program delivered by a Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) registered early childhood teacher.

It is important to note that seeking evidentiary proof of eligibility for ESK can act as a barrier to access for children that have the most to gain from engagement in early childhood education. It is recommended that eligibility be established directly with parents or through referring professionals such as maternal and child health nurses or family services workers. Eligibility can be established verbally or in writing from a parent or professional supporting the family. No other action or information is required to determine eligibility.

Once notified of a child's eligibility for ESK, it is important to support their enrolment in a funded kindergarten program as soon as possible. Children accessing ESK can be enrolled in a three-year-old group, a mixed age group, or a four-year-old group, and can be enrolled in multiple groups in order to access up to 15 hours per week.

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

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 and that your service receives all funding entitlements. For instance, ESK enrolments contribute to School Readiness Funding calculations.

How to apply

Service providers should apply for ESK grants in the Kindergarten Information Management (KIM) system as soon as the child is enrolled. Visit the [KIM](#) page for a reference guide on how to complete an ESK or Access to Early Learning funding request.

Service providers not registered to use the KIM system should contact the appropriate Departmental regional office.

Interpreting services

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 for assistance.

More information on free telephone, video and on-site interpreters for eligible early childhood services can be found through [Use an Interpreter](#). This page also includes a tip sheet developed by Foundation House for working effectively with interpreters to support refugee families.

Early Start Kindergarten in sessional or long day care

ESK is available in sessional kindergarten programs or in kindergarten programs integrated into long day care.

- **ESK in sessional kindergarten programs** – Service providers must offer children eligible for ESK up to 15 hours per week of the kindergarten program free of charge.
- **ESK in integrated kindergarten programs** – In kindergarten programs at a long day care service, ESK can be used in conjunction with the Child Care Subsidy and Additional Child Care Subsidy.

Where ESK children have additional fees for childcare hours outside the kindergarten program, long day care providers should use all available additional funding to reduce or waive fees and provide all kindergarten hours free of charge.

Early Start Kindergarten extension grants

The ESK extension grant is available for children in the year before school who are:

- eligible for the kindergarten per capita grant but not eligible for the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy, and
- from a refugee or asylum seeker background, or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or known to child protection. A child is not required to access ESK in the previous year to access the ESK extension grant.

Service providers should apply for ESK extension grants when entering the child as a 'Year Before School' enrolment in KIM. This can be done as part of annual confirmation or as an adjustment if the child enrolls after confirmation.

Further guidance

Staff in Departmental regional offices can assist families with any queries about ESK or any other kindergarten program; Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) can assist with questions about ESK for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children; and Early Childhood Learning Advisers can assist with questions about ESK for children in out-of-home care.

Regional office contacts

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](#).

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