# Frequently asked Questions: FREE KINDER in 2023

Three- and Four-Year-Old Kinder will be free and available across Victoria at participating services in 2023. Free Kinder is available in both long day care (LDC) and sessional (standalone) settings.

The information outlined in this document must be read in conjunction with the Free Kinder Service Guidelines 2023.

## Managing enrolments for Free Kinder 2023

**What happens if a child is enrolled in two different services (e.g., LDC and a sessional kindergarten service) at the same time? Will both services receive Free Kinder funding for the child?**

Free Kinder, along with all kindergarten funding, is only provided at the service where a child is accessing their funded kindergarten place. Services must ensure that families have signed the [Letter to parents regarding access to one funded kindergarten place](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/improvedchildratioinkindergarten.aspx) to confirm which service their child is accessing their funded kindergarten place at. It is the responsibility of the service to keep a record of this letter for each family and the Department may request a copy of the signed letter in cases where two services are seeking funding for the same child.

**How can my service maximise use of approved places as required to meet demand? How will this requirement be monitored by the Department?**

As outlined in the Kindergarten Funding Guide and Free Kinder Service Guidelines 2023, services are required to maximise their approved places when managing enrolments. This means that it is expected that participating services will collaborate with the Department where there is a risk of children missing out on a funded kindergarten place in a local service, to use approved places to respond to local demand.

This not a new requirement. It reflects the collective responsibility we all have for ensuring that children can benefit from two years of kindergarten and has been an established part of the way we have worked together at a local level for some years.

In practice, this means that your Local Early Childhood Improvement Branch (or local government) may contact your service when it is identified that local communities do not have enough available access to funded kindergarten places. In these cases, the Department will work with services in a practical and responsive way to support approved places to be used, including providing pedagogical and recruitment support as needed.

The Department also encourages providers to continue reviewing their program models in conjunction with their staffing profiles so that all families seeking a place for their child can be accommodated wherever possible. Services can contact their local [Early Childhood Improvement Branch](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/srf.aspx) to seek advice on how to best maximise their approved places or seek recruitment support for eligible services.

**How is the priority of access applied in a Free Kinder setting?**

While all 3- and 4-year-old children will attract Free Kinder funding in participating services, the Priority of Access (PoA) policy is still required to be applied where demand exceeds available places at a particular service. As families are not required to show evidence such as a health care card, pension card or humanitarian visa to access a free program through the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy, it is important that Central Registration and Enrolment Scheme providers and kindergarten services collect all required information to apply the [Priority of Access Criteria](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/Priority-of-Access-Criteria.aspx). Providers are also asked to record this information in the Kindergarten Information Management System (KIMS).

Where a 3-year-old child is eligible for Early Start Kindergarten (ESK), services should continue enrolling these children in ESK at your service.  This ensures that children continue to have access to 15-hour kindergarten programs in all approved settings, and to inform the provision of additional supports, such as School Readiness Funding.

**Will the Find My Kinder site be updated to show which services are offering Free Kinder?**

The Department is exploring options to display which services are participating in Free Kinder on the Find My Kinder website.

## Free Kinder payments

**Why are the Free Kinder subsidies different in sessional and long day cares?**

Free Kinder funding works differently in the two settings. For integrated long day care programs, the service must pass the full Free Kinder payment on as a fee offset to families. This is because fees are charged for all hours of education and care, not just the kindergarten program hours, and the fees are dependent on a number of factors including the family’s Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy entitlement. Free Kinder in sessional programs functions as a fee replacement for the service. The sessional rate has been set higher to enable participating sessional services to offer a free 15-hour program within their current fee structure.

**Are Free Kinder payments GST inclusive?**

These payments are exclusive of GST. GST will only be applied to Free Kinder funding once it is processed in the Service Agreement Management System (SAMS2) if the organisation is registered for GST.

**How and when will I receive Free Kinder payments?**

Participating kindergarten programs will receive Free Kinder payments with their normal recurrent monthly kindergarten payments. As per other kindergarten funding streams, Free Kinder funding is calculated and paid in line with each confirmed child’s funding start date.

Services should ensure their enrolment data is up to date in the Kindergarten Information Management System (KIMS) at all times to ensure the correct funding entitlements are paid.

**If a child starts midway through the year is the Free Kinder funding payment pro-rated, or do they still get the full amount?**

As per normal kindergarten payments, Free Kinder funding is calculated and paid pro-rata from a child’s funding start date. The Free Kinder funding will not form part of a service’s baseline funding, so Free Kinder payments will cease for children who leave during the year.

**What existing funding streams remain available?**

Free Kinder funding is an additional payment to cover the parent fees and will be paid on top of other kindergarten funding streams (excluding Kindergarten Fee Subsidy (KFS), Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) and ESK extension).

Free Kinder funding will replace KFS and the KFS Ratio Supplement for participating services, and the ESK rate has been increased to include the Free Kinder subsidy.

KFS will continue to be available for eligible children in services that elect not to opt in to Free Kinder.

**Can services request an enrolment deposit from families to secure a place?**

Yes, services can continue to charge enrolment deposits but should ensure these do not act as a barrier to enrolling for any families. Services must ensure that families understand that the enrolment deposits will only be refunded if the child commences in the service.

If a family pays an enrolment deposit at a service, but does not commence kindergarten in this service, services are not obliged to refund the enrolment deposit as long as this is made clear to families before they pay.

**Where Free Kinder results in a surplus, how is this able to be spent?**

Sessional services must spend all additional funding in line with acceptable uses of kindergarten funding as set out in the Kindergarten Funding Guide (noting that Early Years Managers and other multi-service providers can manage all kindergarten funding including Free Kinder funding at a portfolio level).

Long day care services must use any surplus funding (i.e., for the minority of cases where parents are charged less than $2,000 in out-of-pocket fees for the year) on improvement efforts for the funded kindergarten program, such as improving quality and supporting engagement.

## Free Kinder in long day care settings

**If a long day care service operates a sessional program, will they receive the higher rate of $2,500?**

Long day care services delivering sessional kindergarten programs will receive the sessional Free Kinder rate ($2,500) subject to:

* charging separate fees for the sessional program; and
* the sessional program not attracting the Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy

Long day care services that attract the sessional Free Kinder subsidy must comply with the funding terms and conditions for sessional services including:

* providing a free 15-hour program for children for funded four-year old kindergarten enrolments, and
* providing a free 5-to-15-hour program for funded three-year-old kindergarten enrolments.

## Free Kinder in sessional settings

**For sessional services that offer over 15 hours, can we specify which 15 hours families attend?**

As a condition of opting in, services providing a sessional program must offer all families a free 15-hour program (or the relevant length of the funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten program up to 15 hours per week). This applies to all funded sessional programs. Where longer program hours are offered these additional hours must be optional. Participating sessional kindergarten services can charge parents for optional program hours over and above the 15 funded hours per week (600 hours per year) and / or ‘wrap around’ care. The fees for these additional hours can be set at the service’s discretion, in consultation with their community, and are not subject to funded kindergarten fee policies.

Services that offer more than 15 hours are encouraged to provide choice to families in determining the days their child accesses their free 15-hour kindergarten program. However, services may choose to set which hours of those days the ‘core’ 15-hour program will be delivered, and which hours will be the additional, optional hours. Services should consider community needs and planning in determining how to offer the additional hours.

**What if our sessional service charges more than $2,500?**

The per child funding level has been set at a rate that covers the fees charged by the vast majority of community-based sessional kindergarten services, so it is expected that there will be a high take up of Free Kinder in 2023. Services that currently charge more than $2,500 for a 15-hour program are encouraged to consider the options available to them to sign up to Free Kinder, including transitional support, taking additional enrolments and charging for additional hours above 15 per week where applicable. All services can continue to fundraise and seek voluntary donations.

While participation in Free Kinder is encouraged, it is not compulsory to participate in the initiative and service providers may elect not to opt in to Free Kinder. All other funding streams (e.g. per capita and Kindergarten Fee Subsidy) will continue as normal and parent fees may be charged.

**Can my service deliver a 15-hour kindergarten program over a fortnight?**

All children enrolled in four-year old kindergarten must be enrolled in a 15-hour a week kindergarten program to be eligible for kindergarten funding. Children can access these hours over a fortnight as long as services are delivering a minimum of 600 hours of kindergarten per year. For example, a child may be enrolled in 18 hours of funded kindergarten the first week and 12 hours the following week to meet the 15 hour program over a fortnight.

## Opt-in process

**Are we opting in for 2023 or ongoing?**

The Free Kinder opt-in process that will open soon is for 2023 only. The process to participate in Free Kinder in subsequent years will be communicated at a later date.

**Can service providers opt in at a program or child level? (i.e., opt-in for the Four-Year-old Kindergarten program only and not the Three-Year-Old Kindergarten program)?**

No, service providers must opt in for all funded kindergarten programs that are being delivered at a service. Services also cannot choose to opt-out of Free Kinder for specific children (i.e., Early Start Kindergarten children)

However, service providers can choose to opt in for some but not all of its services.

**Can we change our mind after we have opted into Free Kinder?**

No. Providers should not opt in to Free Kinder until a final decision has been made on participating in the initiative. This is important so families are not affected by a service opting out at a later stage.

## Other charges

**Can councils and other organisations operating a Central Registration and Enrolment Scheme continue to charge a fee for this service?**

Families registering their child via a Central Registration and Enrolment Scheme may need to pay a registration fee. This fee will not be refunded as it is not the kindergarten program fee and is therefore not covered by the Free Kinder subsidy. A central registration fee should not be charged to families that would usually be eligible for the [Kindergarten Fee Subsidy](https://www.vic.gov.au/costs-kindergarten).

**Can I charge a waitlist fee?**

Services may charge families with a waitlist fee if families register their child directly with a service. This fee will not be refunded as it is not part of the Free Kinder subsidy, and not related to the fee charged for delivery of the kinder program.

**Can I charge for late pick-up?**

Services can charge families late pick-up fees if this is the service’s policy and has been clearly communicated to parents, as this is outside the fee charged for the delivery of the core kindergarten program.

**Can I charge for incursions/excursions?**

Services may charge cost recovery fees (i.e., entry and transport costs) for one-off excursions/ special events (i.e., once a term excursions).

**Can I charge a maintenance levy?**

Additional compulsory charges, including maintenance levies, cannot be charged. This includes for families who do not participate in working bees. Services can request voluntary contributions in lieu of participation in a working bee but must make clear this is not a compulsory charge.

**Can I request donations?**

Kindergartens may ask families for a voluntary donation. However, service must ensure that families understand that donations are not compulsory.