

Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability

This brief is based on a paper released in July 2021 for Social Ventures Australia by the Centre for Community Child Health, a research group of Murdoch Children's Research Institute and a department of The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.



This is the second of two papers prepared by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) for Social Ventures Australia. The papers explore the potential of holistic, integrated early learning service models for improving outcomes for young children and their families who are experiencing vulnerability.

As noted in the first paper, integrated child and family centre (ICFC) is a broad term used to describe service models that aim to meet the needs of children and families through the integration of service provision. There are various models of ICFCs available across Australia that support children and families experiencing vulnerability, who may not receive the appropriate support through the universal early childhood and care system.

"We need to start from a different place - from where families and communities are at, hearing their stories and then responding. ICFCs should not be seen as another form of service for families. We need to adopt a more radical approach. By building in parental and community governance, we can ensure we are being held to account."

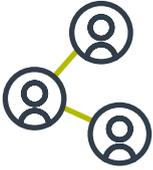
Dr. Tim Moore, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health

This paper explores common elements of ICFCs which have the greatest impact for children experiencing socioeconomic vulnerability, and what is required for high quality implementation of each of these. It reviews national and international examples of holistic, integrated early learning programs for young children and their families. It then uses the Core Care Conditions for Children and Families framework developed in Paper One to analyse how ICFCs can meet the needs of children and families.

Key findings



ICFCs can play an important role in meeting many needs of young children and families, and could help fill a major gap in the current early years environment.



ICFCs should be understood as having a dual function. They can act as social hub, providing a local place where families can go to build social networks; and they can act as a service hub for the delivery of a wide range of integrated child and family services.



There is good evidence from a range of sources as to the most effective ways of delivering services to families experiencing vulnerabilities that can guide how ICFCs are run. These include using relational-based practices, engaging families and communities as co-designers and co-producers of services, and delivering universal services supported by tiered systems of support.



ICFCs cannot meet all the needs of young children and families. To truly enable all children and families to thrive, ICFCs must be accompanied by broader place-based supports that address the conditions under which families are raising young children, and an enabling policy environment, as summarised in the diagram below.

Integrated child and family centres are a community-based service and social hub for children and families

Role as a social hub

- Acts as a natural and safe place within a local community for families with young children to go where they can **meet and connect with other parents and children**
- Is **inclusive** and uses culturally-responsive policies and practices
- Helps build community capacity to care for children through networks and civil society

Role as a service hub

- Delivers a **wide range of child and family services on site based on local needs**, including high quality child care and early childhood education programs, preschool parenting programs, community / supported playgroups, and core health services
- Provides **access to other services** including mental health, financial counselling and housing services
- Is staffed by **multi-disciplinary teams** working together with other agencies to provide **integrated holistic support for families**
- Has tiered **systems of support** to match the level of need of the children and family.

To truly support all children and families to thrive, they require broader place-based supports and an enabling policy environment

Enabling Policy Environment

Shapes the social determinants that affect child development and family functioning, e.g. poverty, housing, employment

Broader place-based supports

Shapes the community factors that affect child development and family functioning e.g. the built environment, transport, family-friendly facilities

Integrated child and family centres

Provides a holistic service and social hub to meet the needs of children and families

Early childhood services and parenting and family supports

High quality **ECEC** should be included in any ICFC model. Quality is an essential component for effective ECEC services. **Parenting programs** also need to be available to parents, with a range of program options available to cater for diversity of parents and parent needs. **Supported playgroups** should also be considered as an option offered through ICFCs.

What is quality?

- Staff well qualified
- NQF standards met
- Staff well remunerated and supported so turnover is reduced and continuity maintained

“When of high quality and sufficient intensity, these learning environments (ECEC) can help alter the developmental trajectories of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.”

Dr. Tim Moore, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Community Child Health

Service systems for supporting children and families

Research on the key aspects of service systems for supporting children and families finds that:

- The way in which services are delivered is as important as what is delivered – practitioners need to work with families in ways that are relationship-based and family-centred.
- Outreach services are needed.
- Services need to engage parents as partners in co-design and co-production.
- Design and delivery of services need to be informed by the lived experience of parents and their views regarding the challenges they face and how they can be met.
- Members of the target population should be employed as co-workers and trainers.
- A multi-level ecological approach is needed, providing direct services to children and support to families, as well as action to improve the conditions under which families are living, and the structural social determinants that shape those conditions.
- Access to key services should be simplified by integrating services and supports across different sectors.
- All parents should have access to a universal suite of services, with a tiered system of support services provided to those with additional needs.
- Services need to be inclusive and based on principles of universal design.



Integrated early learning programs

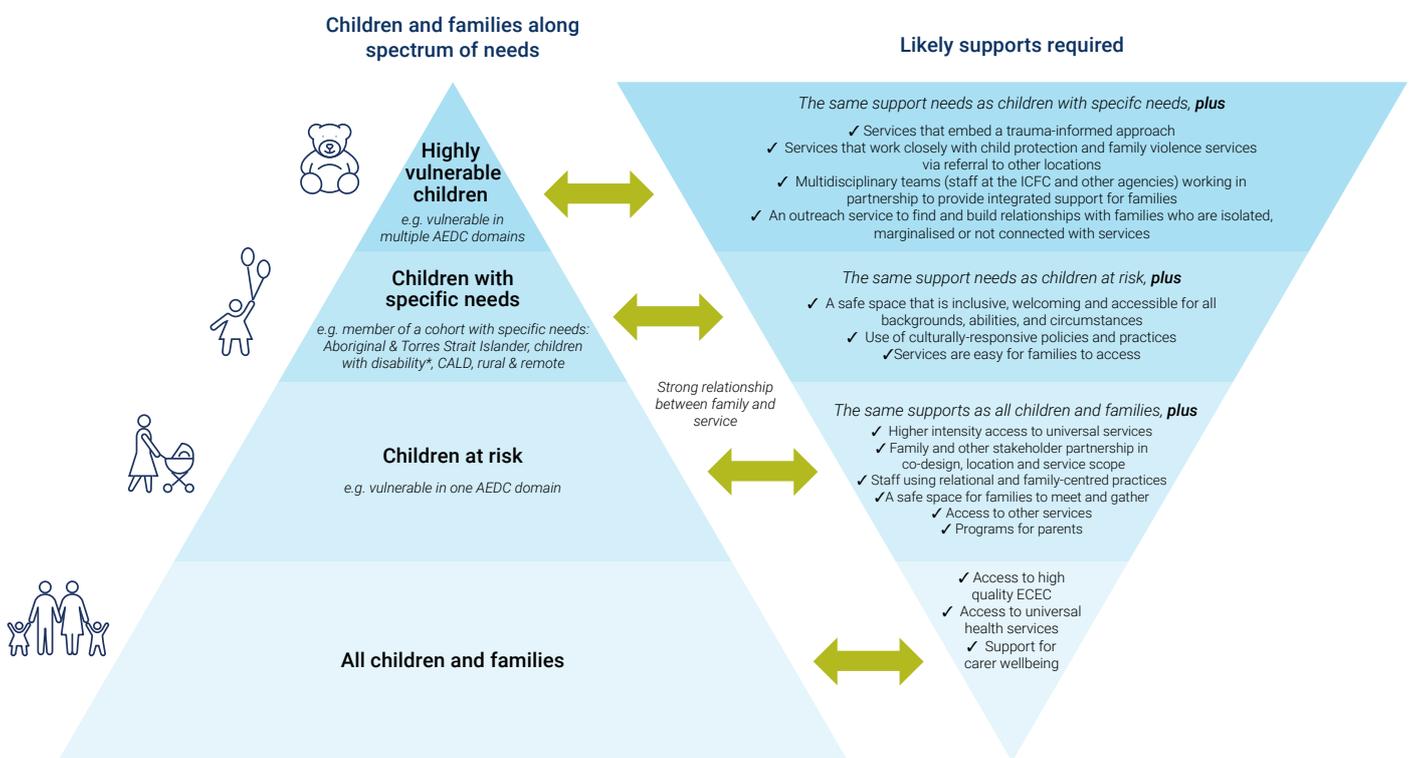
Many programs offering integrated early childhood services have been implemented worldwide. There is no standard delivery model, however ICFCs usually take the form of a single location for the delivery of a range of child and family services.

The Australian models that were included in the analysis were *Tasmanian Child and Family Centres*, *Our Place (Vic)*, *Challis Parenting and Early Learning Centre (WA)*, *Early Years Education Program (Vic)*, *Early Years Places (Queensland)*, *Early Years Schools (ACT)*, *Aboriginal Child and Family Centres*, *Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services*, *Children's Ground (NT)* and community hubs. A desktop analysis was conducted with conclusions based on publicly available information about each model.

The review found that no program had sufficient information to make a full judgement about its efficacy. The quality of the evidence around ICFCs overall is still not well developed. Only a few randomised control trials have been conducted, and only one of them in Victoria, Australia (Early Years Education Program). However, there is evidence from other sources that show what common elements are needed for effective delivery of integrated services. It also highlights the potential of ICFCs to address many of the core needs of children and families.

Most ICFCs do more than just provide child-focussed ECEC programs. They also provide a variety of parenting programs and many seek to create hubs that allow integrated service delivery on a range of services.

Considering these programs in the light of the Core Care Conditions for Children and Families framework, the paper concluded there is more that existing ICFCs could be doing to promote child and family health and wellbeing. Many programs focus on promoting the learning of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and measuring their success in terms of school readiness. Although this is important, they could be doing much more to support more holistic life-long health, development and wellbeing.



For all families there needs to be a strong and empowering relationship between the child, family, and service that supports identification of additional needs and linkages to the required tier of relevant support

This structure for tiered service needs can be used as a tool to assess the completeness of responses across a system, as shown in the next pages

*Supports required for children with a disability need to be further developed, with strong potential to provide them through a universal service model. To be explored at a later stage.

Core features of ICFCs

Key program elements for effective ICFCs are detailed in the table below. These elements have been identified by drawing upon the Core Care Conditions for Children and Families framework, as well as the findings of the evidence reviews of the specific ICFC models and broader academic reviews of integrated services. Services need to be tiered based on the spectrum of needs of children and families that they serve, as outlined in diagram on page 4.

The paper identifies a range of structural and programmatic issues for consideration in the set-up of ICFCs for impact. There was little evidence to interrogate the more detailed question of what each program component requires for effective implementation.



Staffing

- ✓ **Staff use relational and family-centred practices, and have training and ongoing support in their use**
- ✓ Clinical supervision is provided, and reflective practice
- ✓ Multidisciplinary teams (e.g. internal and external) work in partnership to provide integrated support for families and have dedicated time for coordination
- ✓ Strong leadership
- ✓ Members of the community are engaged and trained as co-workers
- ✓ Has an outreach service to find and build relationships with families who are isolated, marginalised or not connected with services



General features

- ✓ **A natural place in the local community for families with young children to go to connect with others and get access to a range of services.**
- ✓ Safe spaces for families to meet; inclusive and welcoming for all backgrounds, abilities and circumstances
- ✓ Uses culturally-responsive policies and practices
- ✓ Parents attend at any time during opening hours
- ✓ Easy for families to access (e.g. do not need a car)
- ✓ Provides spaces for family activities (e.g. communal dining area)
- ✓ Able to deliver a range of child and family services on site, based on local needs
- ✓ Shared vision and philosophy underpinning the program, based on core practices and principles
- ✓ Has a clearly articulated practice framework that specifies outcomes and how programs provided achieve those outcomes



Design, management, governance

- ✓ **Core decisions about the location of the facility, the design of the building and the services to be provided are made in partnership with the families and community who will be using it**
- ✓ Formal governance includes users of the service
- ✓ Adequate and sustainable funding



Service options and supports, based on community need

- ✓ Provides high quality ECEC and tiered system of support to address additional child and family needs
- ✓ Range of programs for parents e.g. parenting programs.
- ✓ Core health services including maternal and child health, dental
- ✓ Access to other services e.g. mental health, financial counselling, housing services
- ✓ Works closely with child protection and family violence services
- ✓ Uses tools to identify and provide additional support for child and family concerns
- ✓ Supports from birth, and potentially antenatal support

Conclusion

Assessment of the effective ICFC components against the **Core Care Conditions for Children and Families** framework confirms that ICFCs have significant potential to meet many of the key needs of children experiencing diverse vulnerabilities and their families. ICFCs can also fill a major gap in the current early years environment. However, they are limited in their ability to redress the broader structural factors that affect family functioning, such as access to parental leave and financial stability, as noted in the diagram on page 2. To meet all the needs of children and families, the child and family centres need to form part of wider initiatives that address the other critical factors that affect family functioning. These take two main forms:



place-based initiatives involving local government and other services that can address the 'mid-stream' neighbourhood and community factors that affect family functioning, and



a **high-level coalition to push for actions to address the broader 'up-stream' social determinants** like poverty, income, housing, employment, parental leave and social inequities that also shape family functioning.

ICFCs should be understood as more than a service delivery model. They are both a setting where a range of services can be delivered, as well as a location that facilitates opportunities to improve child and family wellbeing. ICFCs can therefore be conceptualised as both an end in themselves and a means to an end. They allow relationships to be formed with other parents and professionals, which are beneficial in their own right and contribute to child and parental wellbeing. They also provide a setting through which a range of services can be delivered, helping children and parents to develop and change.