



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Submission to the
Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian
Parliament

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Brotherhood of St Laurence

November 2019

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the BSL continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

Our initiatives to support families of CALD background in the early years include:

- **HIPPY:** a two-year home-based program for four and five-year-olds, empowering parents to be their child's first teacher. While preparing children for school, HIPPY supports parents, especially women, with their transition to employment. HIPPY is funded by federal DSS with 100 sites across Australia.
- **Connie Benn Community Centre:** a community hub adjacent to the Atherton Gardens public housing estate in Fitzroy, which has many families from refugee and migrant backgrounds. BSL offers parenting support programs, including HIPPY, Growing Learners, supported playgroups and Career Pathways workshops. The hub also delivers Maternal Child Health services, child care and kindergarten, run by the local council.
- **Jindi Family and Community Centre:** a community hub in Mernda, which offers connected early years services including playgroups, early childhood education and care, Maternal Child Health and allied health, and community programs including English and computer classes.
- **Integrated Family Services:** a state government funded program, delivered through BSL's Multicultural Communities Team, where our role within the North East Alliance is primarily as the CALD specialist to support culturally and linguistically diverse families to address parenting and child welfare issues.
- **Refugee Child Outreach Program:** a philanthropically funded program which supports newly arrived refugee/asylum seeker families with children aged 0 – 8 years to engage in early childhood services.
- **Growing Learners:** an inter-generational model which supports both parents and children (0 – 3 years) to build their identity as learners, by providing training to support parents in their own educational and career goals and in their role as child's first teacher. It is funded philanthropically and by Goodstart.
- **Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI):** BSL is an ECEI and LAC partner for the federally funded NDIS in five metropolitan regions in Victoria. ECEI coordinators work with families whose child has a disability or developmental delay. Supports include assisting families with linkages to mainstream services, building community capacity to be inclusive and supporting families to access the NDIS.
- **Cross-Cultural Responsiveness Training:** delivered by our Diversity Unit, to assist services to better support and reduce barriers participants of CALD backgrounds may face in accessing services.
- **Major research** on inclusive early years models and economic security for all.

Brotherhood of St Laurence

67 Brunswick Street

Fitzroy Vic. 3065

ABN 24 603 467 024

Ph. (03) 9483 1183

www.bsl.org.au

For further information or to discuss this submission, please contact:

Nicole Rees

Senior Manager, Public Policy

Email: nrees@bsl.org.au

Ph. (03) 9483 2428

Hutch Hussein

Senior Manager, Diversity Unit

Email: hutchussein@bsl.org.au

Ph: 0438 507 103

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the cross-cultural responsiveness of publicly funded early years services by:
 - creating a Best Practice Toolkit for Cultural Inclusiveness for the early years sector
 - DET and MCHN services adopting the audited DHHS community services requirement for all staff engaging with CALD communities to do cross-cultural responsiveness training
 - requiring cultural diversity plans and cultural diversity targets which reflect local community demographics
 - funding interpreters from a dedicated funding stream, rather than from an organisation's budget, to incentivise providers to target families with limited English proficiency
 - promoting within kindergartens the uptake of cultural inclusion packages, which can be accessed with School Readiness Funding.
2. Create a state-wide Early Childhood Workforce Strategy and Allied Health Workforce Strategy that:
 - has targets to recruit and retain bicultural¹ early childhood and allied health workers
 - embeds tailored supervision and training for bicultural staff members
 - strengthens curriculum in early childhood educator training related to cross-cultural responsiveness.
3. Continue investing in bicultural services including bilingual story time, kindergarten and playgroup models.
4. Promote best practices to strengthen communication between early years services and families of CALD backgrounds (as part of our recommended state-wide Best Practice for Cultural Inclusiveness Toolkit), including:
 - providing informs and information, including kindergarten enrolment forms, in the main languages of the surrounding community
 - adopting uniform enrolment processes and simplifying forms to avoid overly complex back-and-forth processes
 - using text messages (which can be easily translated on smart phones) to disseminate information, rather than letters.
5. Create a linked Maternal Child Health and kindergarten information database which will operate across LGAs, alerting staff if children are not enrolled in either service.
6. Strengthen support for children of refugee and asylum seeker background by:
 - extending eligibility criteria for the Early Start program to children of refugee/asylum seeker background
 - introducing a 90% target for enrolment of children from refugee and asylum seeker background in Victorian kindergartens

¹ In this submission, a bicultural worker means a person employed to work specifically with people or communities with whom they share similar cultural experiences and understandings, and who is employed to use their cultural skills and knowledge to communicate between communities and their agency.

- seeking federal government agreement to require providers of Status Resolution Support Services (for families seeking asylum) and Settlement Services (for humanitarian entrants) to advise local councils of new families in catchments
 - allocating kindergarten places for children of refugee/asylum seeker background who arrive after commencement of the kindergarten year.
7. Establish a scaled kindergarten subsidy rate to mitigate the steep jump for families whose income falls just above the health care card cut-off.
 8. Provide ongoing funding to support children from families seeking asylum to access Early Childhood Early Intervention supports under the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Federal rules render them ineligible for this support.
 9. Pilot a 'Community Ambassador' program that employs community leaders to champion early childhood education through Victoria's existing Refugee Action Program infrastructure.
 10. Increase the availability of programs that strengthen parents' capabilities in their role as their child's first teacher.
 11. Increase the use of home visits to maximise engagement with families by:
 - preferencing early years programs that incorporate a home visit component
 - resourcing MCH to undertake initial appointments in the home where families of refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds arrive in Victoria with a young child.
 12. Actively engage fathers in early years settings by preferencing organisations with a proven commitment to involving fathers and delivering on weekends or after hours.
 13. Encourage and incentivise the use of mentors and volunteers in state-funded programs to support families to connect with and navigate early childhood services.
 14. Extend and develop place-based models that align supports and resources of multiple organisations to provide holistic support to children and their families
 15. Strengthen collection of data related to engagement of children from CALD backgrounds in state-funded early years programs by:
 - measuring kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health attendance rates (rather than measuring enrolment rates alone)
 - collecting data on children's ethnicity (rather than only country of birth and language).

Overview

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is pleased to contribute to this important Inquiry into the early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. This submission draws on our practical experience, along with our research and that of others, to identify what is working well, opportunities for change and future directions.

At the outset, it is critical to note that Victoria has a very large CALD community. Migrants come to the state from a wide range of countries and cultures, and the 2016 Census shows that 26 per cent of Victorians speak a language other than English at home.

This large group is made up of people and communities with diverse backgrounds and experiences – from those who are seeking asylum to skilled independent migrants. There are stark differences in education levels, English proficiency, health, socioeconomic circumstances and home environments – all of which affect a child’s future success.

BSL’s work primarily focuses on supporting newly arrived communities of refugee and asylum seeker background, together with migrants experiencing intersecting forms of disadvantage. Accordingly, families from these communities are the focus of this submission.

Investment in the early years is critical ... but children from vulnerable CALD families are at risk of missing out

The early years of life are the critical time to lay the foundations for a child’s future. The first 1000 days are the most formative² with early experiences shaping relationships in adult life, participation in the workforce and future inclusion in society.³ Investments in the early years are more cost-effective than those made at any other stage of life⁴ and can prevent and reduce future vulnerabilities and disadvantage.

Families of CALD backgrounds are less likely to access critical early years services such as Maternal Child Health Nurses (MCHN) and kindergarten⁵, when compared to the national average.⁶ Those most at risk of low or no engagement including families experiencing intersectional disadvantage.

² Moore, T., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., Keyes, M., & West, S. (2017) ‘The first thousand days: an evidence paper’ Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Parkville.

³ Department of Education and Training (2017) ‘The state of Victoria’s children report’; Harrison, LJ., Goldfeld, S., Metcalfe, E. & Moore T. (2012) ‘Early learning programs that promote children’s developmental and educational outcomes’ Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health & Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁴ Heckman, J., Pinto R., & Savelyev, P. (2013) ‘Understanding the mechanisms through which an Influential early childhood program boosted adult outcomes’ *American Economic Review*, 103 (6), 2052-86.

⁵ Centre for Community Child Health (2017) ‘Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness’; Baxter, J., & Hand, K. (2013) ‘Access to early childhood education in Australia’, Research report no. 24, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

⁶ McDonald, M., Turner, C., & Gray, J. (2014) ‘Evidence into action: playgroups for diverse communities’ Melbourne: Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups; Productivity Commission (2014) ‘Childcare and early childhood learning’, Canberra.

The Productivity Commission identified that families experiencing one or more of the following vulnerabilities are less likely to participate in early childhood education and care:⁷

- **Children from CALD backgrounds with limited English spoken at home:** Some 77.7% of migrants in Victoria come from non-main English speaking countries – the highest in Australia.
- **Children with a parent or sibling with a disability:** Families of refugee backgrounds are disproportionately affected by disability, due to experiences of torture, trauma and displacement.⁸
- **Children whose parents are long-term unemployed:** Families of CALD background face disproportionately high rates of unemployment.⁹ Many of the families we work with struggle to gain employment due to language barriers and/or their prior qualifications not being recognised in Australia. Others are unable to seek ongoing employment due to their visa status which may not provide work rights, or long-term security to employers.
- **Children whose mother has not completed high school:** Many of the parents we work with have had their schooling disrupted by displacement or had no access to schooling in their country of origin.
- **Children in low-income households:** Families of CALD backgrounds face high rates of poverty.¹⁰

There is no publicly available data on which CALD communities are most likely to miss out on early years services in Victoria, but we know from experience that some communities are underrepresented. The BSL has recently been commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Training to help develop strategies to build engagement in kindergarten among Myanmar/Burmese; Afghani; Assyrian; Chaldean and Iraqi and Arabic-speaking communities.

Poor engagement in early years services translates to higher rates of vulnerability when starting school

Limited engagement in early years settings means that developmental delays and vulnerabilities are less likely to be identified and addressed promptly, and the well-known benefits of early years education are not enjoyed.

Children with limited English spoken at home are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable across four Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains upon entering school,¹¹

⁷ Productivity Commission (2014) 'Childcare and early childhood learning', Canberra.

⁸ Refugee Council of Australia (2019) 'Barriers and exclusions: the support needs of newly arrived refugees with a disability'.

⁹ Centre for Community Child Health (2017) 'Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness'; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) 'Characteristics of recent migrants'.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Goldfeld, S., O'Connor, M., Mithen, J., Sayers, M., & Brinkman, S. (2014). 'Early development of emerging and English-proficient bilingual children at school entry in an Australian population cohort' *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 38, 42-51.

including demonstrating higher rates of anti-social behaviours, peer problems and emotional symptoms than the general population.¹² Over 90 per cent of children with low English proficiency are developmentally vulnerable.¹³

However, children from CALD backgrounds whose families are proficient in English are at no greater risk of starting school developmentally vulnerable than the general population (approximately 22%), unless experiencing intersectional disadvantages such as those outlined above.¹⁴

There is much Victoria can do to build engagement of CALD communities in early years services

CALD families can encounter many barriers to engaging with early years services, including difficulty navigating the system, cost, ineligibility, cultural concerns, distrust of services, waiting lists and poverty (see Table 1 in the following chapter).

In 2014, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office made recommendations aimed at increasing participation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Victorian services¹⁵, many of which are yet to be implemented. We echo its call to build **cross-cultural responsiveness** of mainstream services, including through **upskilling front-line staff** and developing **cultural diversity plans**.

Recognising this is not easy, we call for development and maintenance of a '**Best Practice Cultural Inclusion Toolkit**' to equip early years providers and the sector to become proficient at engaging CALD families, including through **easier enrolment and communication processes**.

Workforce is all important. With the current and forecast shortfalls in early years staff and allied health professions, Victoria has a strategic opportunity to **actively recruit bicultural workers** who can help to bridge cultural divides, particularly for communities with lower participation.

'I was working with a family who is living on Bridging Visa A and has no entitlement to income. There were concerns identified by services about the four-year-old boy's 'all-round development'. However, he was not eligible and/or there was no capacity for any supports. I attempted to link them with local supports, but was informed that:

- Hume Council did not have any Kindergarten capacity
 - The boy was too old to be seen by MCHN
 - The family's visa status made him ineligible for NDIS
 - Refugee Health Nurses had a four-month waitlist
 - Hume Moreland Child FIRST had a three-month waiting list – **Family Services Practitioner, BSL**
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¹² Department of Education and Training (2016) 'The state of Victoria's children report'.

¹³ Woolfenden, S., Posada, N., Krchnakova, R., Crawford, J., Gilbert, J., Jursik, B., Sarkozy, V., Perkins, D., & Kemp, L. (2014) 'Equitable access to developmental surveillance and early intervention – understanding the barriers for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds' *Health Expectations* 18, 3286; Productivity Commission (2014) 'Childcare and early childhood learning', Canberra.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2014) 'Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers'.

Other key enablers include:

- **community involvement**, including using **community ambassadors** to ensure information is provided by trusted people in languages they understand, and engaging the whole family, including fathers
- targeted measures for families of refugee/asylum seeker background to bolster access to and participation in MCH and kindergarten
- easier enrolment processes, including a state-wide integrated MCHN service and kindergarten database
- using **home visits** to reach isolated families and build their confidence to connect with community activities and early years services (as done in the Brotherhood's Refugee Child Outreach program, see Appendix)
- strengthening the **home learning environment** by supporting parents in their role as first teachers (as done in the Brotherhood's HIPPY program, see Appendix)
- **better data** collection to inform policy and programs
- reduction in out-of-pocket costs
- and place-based **integrated child and family hubs** where families feel safe to access a range of complementary supports – such as the Doveton College model.

The Brotherhood stands ready to assist the Committee in this important Inquiry.

CALD families face a range of challenges accessing early years services

Table 1: Common barriers faced by families of CALD backgrounds

| Barrier | Description |
|---|--|
| Difficulty navigating the early years sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The early years system is complex, with a disconnection between early years education and care, maternal and child health and family services. The interplay of federal, state and local government programs adds to this complexity. Families of CALD backgrounds who have not heard of these services in their country of origin may be unsure of why the services are important, what the eligibility criteria are and where to go to access the services. Enrolment processes are often difficult for families with low-English proficiency to complete. |
| Actual and perceived barriers to eligibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families seeking asylum are not eligible for certain entitlements and services, such as child care rebates and NDIS. Having been turned away from some services or payments, many believe they are not eligible for other early years supports. Many communities have not had access to services such as publicly funded disability support in their home countries. Consequently, some believe such care is a family responsibility, and/or believe it involves large fees.¹⁶ |
| Language barriers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low English proficiency is often a key barrier. Many early years services do not consistently use interpreters or provide information in community languages. Families that are newly arrived can struggle to engage if they do not have friends or family who can translate letters and enrolment forms. While humanitarian entrants may have settlement caseworkers, they often have excessive caseloads. |
| Cultural barriers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families may not wish to use child care due to a cultural belief that family is best placed to care for their children. Some families see teachers or key workers as superiors or authority figures and may be hesitant to state when an approach is not working for them, and simply disengage Our ECEI staff note that families from collective cultures may face difficulties accepting respite care from a non-family member, while others face shame and stigma towards disability. |

¹⁶ Foundation House (2016) 'The Early Childhood Access and Participation Project: talking with Chin families from Burma about early childhood services' Foundation House, Melbourne.

| Barrier | Description |
|---|---|
| <p>Experience of torture and trauma</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Victorian Early Years Framework recognises that those who have experienced trauma have additional barriers to access services. Trauma can manifest in different ways, affecting children’s attachment, cognitive functioning, learning and behaviours.¹⁷ Often these effects can be misdiagnosed as learning disorders.¹⁸ • Our Integrated Family Services and Refugee Child Outreach team often works with children suffering separation anxiety flowing from the refugee experience. Families also frequently harbor concerns about children being apart from them. • Parents may have reduced parenting capacity while suffering from trauma.¹⁹ |
| <p>Long waiting lists especially in growth corridors</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long waiting lists for MCHN, playgroups and kindergartens mean that children miss out on critical services, particularly if they arrive in Australia after the start of the school year. • Unmet demand for early years services in Melbourne’s growth corridors, where many families of CALD background with young children reside, is considerable.²⁰ With some 60–100 babies born weekly in outer growth corridors, essential infrastructure - including early years services - has not been able to keep pace with the burgeoning population. |
| <p>Disability</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BSL’s ECEI and Diversity Unit’s research in Melbourne’s North East showed that families with children experiencing disability face additional barriers navigating the early years. • Families in our NDIS ECEI program report feeling unwelcome at their local preschool and being ‘encouraged’ by the provider to seek enrolment elsewhere. The logistics of getting a child with disability to preschool—especially for short half-day sessions, and if outside their local neighbourhood—can make it all too hard. |
| <p>Social isolation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CALD communities are at a higher risk of social isolation.²¹ Families in our Refugee Child Outreach program have reported lacking the confidence to ask for support. Further, their children have not been able to practice play as they often do not mix with children of their own age. |

¹⁷ Paxton, G., & Kiang, K. (2018) ‘Child and adolescent health: a resource of the Australian Refugee Health Practice Guide’, Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, Melbourne.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Foundation House (2016) ‘School’s in for refugees: a whole-school approach to supporting students and families of refugee background’, 2nd edn.

²⁰ Centre for Community Child Health (2017) ‘Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness’; Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (2014) ‘Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers’.

²¹ Parliament of Victoria, Family and Community Development Committee (2018) ‘Inquiry into perinatal services’.

| Barrier | Description |
|--|--|
| A fear of authority, particularly government organisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families of refugee background have frequently suffered persecution or marginalisation by the government in their country of origin. Some migrants have come from countries governed by dictatorships or other oppressive regimes. Consequently, seeking support from the government can be confronting and can deter families from attending early years services.²² Those on temporary visas may fear that impressions gained by government services will impact their visa outcome and/or result in deportation. |
| Fear of judgement and fear of child protection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear that cultural norms or parenting styles will be judged by service providers is a re-occurring theme. Some families are fearful that authorities can remove children from their care, which can create reluctance to engage with early years services and the perception that the risk of contact with services outweighs the benefits.²³ |
| Negative/no experience of schooling in their country of origin | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents often base their views of early childhood on their own lived experience as a child. Some parents did not have the opportunity to attend school in their country of origin, particularly if they were expected to work or look after their siblings from a young age. Others have experienced damaging schooling environments where punishments such as lashings were common. This can result in hesitance to expose children to learning environments outside the family home. |
| Families may not value the Australian approach to early years education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our families report that the Australian early years system, underpinned by the pedagogy of 'learning through play', is at odds with the education style in their country of origin. For instance, clients from Syria report that children started kindergarten and school at a younger age and focused on formal academic learning and rigid discipline. If families do not understand the value of learning through play, they may treat early years services as unimportant, as they do not perceive their child to be 'learning'. |
| Actual and perceived out-of-pocket costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While some services such as kindergarten are subsidised, many families still cannot afford to attend. Those who fall just above the health care card subsidy face a steep incline in cost, and are often unable to pay, particularly if they have multiple children to provide for. Other cost impediments apply to child care. Families, who are not eligible for the Child Care Benefit, such as families seeking asylum, can struggle to find care for their children under school age. As a result, parents are unable to engage in employment or study to provide for their children. Some families we work with have believed there is a cost involved in MCHN services and/or that utilising subsidised kindergarten would limit their access to later education. These parents prefer to save this perceived educational voucher for their child's university education. |

²² Warr, D., Mann, R., Forbes, D. & Turner, C.. (2013) 'Once you've built some trust: using playgroups to promote children's health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(1), 41.

²³ *ibid.*

| Barrier | Description |
|--|--|
| Transport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many families, particularly those in outer growth corridors, do not have public transport within walking distance, and/or services run infrequently. This affects the viability of attending services.²⁴ For some families, Family Day Care services that drop off and pick up their children directly are often preferred to kindergarten. |
| Multiple priorities during settlement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While Settlement Services support humanitarian entrants in their first five years, high case-loads together with the priority placed on housing, employment and income support work against a child-centred approach. Parents are often focused on pressing day-to-day needs, like securing housing, learning English and finding employment. Attendance at Maternal and Child Health centres and early education programs may not be a priority.²⁵ <p style="margin-left: 40px;">‘Playgroups are not their focus. They’re focused on housing. Where are they gonna live? What are they gonna eat? So the last thing on their mind is bringing their children to a playground or bringing their children to playgroup. So that is one reason why they’re, they make themselves isolated. Not directly, but that happens because they’re focusing on where am I gonna live with my children today’.</p> <p style="margin-left: 40px;">Warr et al. (2013)</p> |
| Living in crisis and housing transience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families seeking asylum who are not working rely on Commonwealth Status Resolution Support Services (‘SRSS’) payments (89% of the Newstart Allowance) or have no income at all. As a result, attending early years services comes behind meeting other essential needs. These families are also often unable to access mainstream services including employment or education opportunities. Insecure housing is a common experience, which makes it difficult to consistently engage in early years services. Housing transience makes it difficult to receive enrolment information. Families may have to navigate the early years system again in a new area and return to the bottom of waiting lists. |

²⁴ Warr, D., Mann, R., Forbes, D. & Turner, C. (2013) ‘Once you’ve built some trust: using playgroups to promote children’s health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds’ *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(1), 41.

²⁵ Centre for Community Health (2017) ‘Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness’.

Recommendations for action

Cultural responsiveness can be greatly strengthened

‘A lot of us don’t go back (to MCHN services) because we feel judged – because we don’t follow the book - we need someone to feel comfortable with us and what we are doing with our kids.’ –

**Participant, EPEC Pacifica project
Brimbank (2017)**

Culturally responsive services go a long way to improving early childhood and settlement outcomes. Whether they are government agencies or public funded community services, frontline early years services need to develop their capacity to engage local newly arrived communities.

In 2014, the Victorian Auditor-General’s Report on Access to Services for Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers found that services frequently could not demonstrate that their programs and strategies were designed in response to community needs.²⁶ While some departments could

demonstrate understanding of multicultural principles, only the Department of Health demonstrated at a strategic level that it understood the complex and multiple needs of this group. Further, the report found that service provision and outcomes for refugee or migrant communities were not monitored or reported. Other studies have similarly found a lack of cross-cultural responsiveness by other mainstream services, such as NDIS.²⁷

Our clients regularly report ‘cultural safety’ issues that impact on their engagement with early years services, including:

- **Where westernised standards of child rearing and parenting conflict with cultural norms.** Areas of tension include co-sleeping, diet, discipline and following the MCHN book. To navigate these complex issues, staff need to be equipped with tools to converse in an effective way to ensure children’s wellbeing and without disengaging families.
- **A ‘broad brush’ approach:** Families often comment that service providers do not consider the differences within the CALD community, which is large and varied. The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office found a key issue was that DET and DHHS grouped:
 - migrants, refugees and asylum seekers into a broad pool of vulnerable and disadvantaged people, which may lead to the specific needs of these cohorts not being identified and addressed appropriately.²⁸

Services need to be proficient in delivering tailored responses.

²⁶ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (2014) ‘Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers’.

²⁷ Heneker, K.J., Zizzo, G., Awata, M., & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2017) ‘Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the National Disability Insurance Scheme’ Australian Centre for Community Services Research, Flinders University, Adelaide, 76; AMPARO Advocacy (2016) ‘The NDIS and culturally and linguistically diverse communities: aiming high for equitable access in Queensland’ 83; Mavromaras, K., Moskos, M., Mahuteau, S. & Isherwood, L. (2018) ‘Evaluation of NDIS: final report’ National Institute of Labour Studies, Flinders University, Adelaide.

²⁸ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (2014) ‘Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers’.

- **Cultural misunderstandings, potentially leading to dire consequences:** A case study from our Integrated Family Services team illustrates the danger of cultural misunderstandings:

‘Integrated Family Services (IFS) received a referral from child protection after concerns raised by a child care centre about a child arriving with a ‘sandwich made on mouldy bread’. IFS staff discussed this with the mother, who reported that she was told by the centre to pack a sandwich for her child. Bread was not used in her country of birth, and she did not realise that the colour on the bread was mould. The mother was surprised to learn that she could send food which the family were more familiar with. She soon purchased a thermos and would send dumplings, noodle soup, etc. The IFS worker and the mother worked together to assist parent and child care to find ways for collaborative communication.

Family Services Team Leader, BSL

Cross-cultural responsiveness across early years services could be improved in many ways such as:

- **A ‘Best Practice Toolkit for Cultural Inclusiveness’ for use by the early years sector:** The toolkit would guide everyday practice of frontline and management staff, providing communication strategies and classroom activities that signify to parents that their culture is valued. Best practice would include learning greetings and providing welcome signs in local languages, and inviting grandparents to kindergarten to discuss their culture with children.
- **Cross-cultural responsiveness training:** This ought to be a standard part of the induction and ongoing professional development of all early years’ service providers. While some areas of government (federal, state and local) have introduced cross-cultural training (for example, Victoria has established a panel of cross-cultural training providers and mandated training for some DHHS-funded services) it is far from universal.²⁹ The DHHS standard could be extended to services funded by other state departments, including DET.
- **Cultural diversity plans:** State departments require cultural diversity plans, but there is no current requirement to report on their effectiveness. The Victorian Auditor-General’s Office highlighted that DET and DHHS had a ‘lack of current, comprehensive and evaluated cultural diversity plans’ and that ‘genuine accountability for performance...with public monitoring and reporting of how department initiatives are leading to improved access for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers’ is needed.³⁰

BSL’S Diversity Unit

BSL’s Diversity Unit houses our Cross-Cultural Consultancy social enterprise, leveraging our 60-year specialist expertise in the multicultural sector. In the past financial year, we have undertaken 55 training workshops raising the cultural awareness skills of 1186 attendees from NGOs, local councils, government departments and internal BSL teams.

²⁹ Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (2014) ‘Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers’.

³⁰ *ibid.*

Cultural diversity plans developed by early years' service providers could be basic – and include understanding local community demographics; developing engagement strategies with key CALD communities and setting relevant targets for recruitment or participation.

- **Centralised interpreter funding:** Drawing interpreting costs from a separate pool of state funds would avoid the current problem of state-funded programs having to meet their own interpreter costs. (This creates an incentive to minimise the use of interpreters, and a disincentive to reach out to families not proficient in English.)
- **Use of Cultural Inclusion Support packages:** These packages, offered as part of the State's School Readiness Funding, are an effective tool to support a child's cultural needs in early years settings. The funding can assist with:
 - bilingual books and multimedia
 - cross-cultural responsiveness training for staff
 - orientation sessions with parents that explain the importance of the early years and kindergarten (delivered by FKA Children's services).

'To translate information is expensive and program funds are required to facilitate this work. Funding does not include free access to interpreters, therefore the program budget needs to include this cost which can take away from service delivery

– Family Services Team Leader, BSL

School Readiness Funding is brand new. Uptake of Cultural Inclusion Support packages will depend on promotion and awareness of this opportunity.

Recommendation 1:

Strengthen the cross-cultural responsiveness of public funded early years services by:

- creating a Best Practice Toolkit for Cultural Inclusiveness for the early years sector
- DET and MCHN services adopting the audited DHHS community services requirement for funded staff in all programs engaging with CALD communities to undertake cross-cultural responsiveness training
- requiring cultural diversity plans and cultural diversity targets which reflect local community demographics
- funding interpreters from a dedicated funding stream, rather than from an organisation's budget, to incentivise providers to target families with limited English proficiency
- promoting the uptake of cultural inclusion packages within kindergarten settings, which can be accessed with School Readiness Funding

Bicultural workers make a difference

Bicultural workers are those employed to work specifically with people or communities with whom they share similar cultural experiences and understandings, and to use their cultural skills and knowledge to negotiate and communicate between communities and their employing

agency.³¹ They are hugely influential in how families perceive and access early years services.³² Our experience shows that bicultural workers are also effective in working across cultural groups. For instance, they can harness shared experiences of forced migration, learning a new language and navigating a new country to build rapport with families who do not share the same cultural background.

Bicultural workers and volunteers have been recommended both domestically and internationally as an effective strategy to access and retain engagement with CALD communities.³³ Studies show they act as 'cultural brokers', who facilitate a 'transferal of trust and an opportunity to build rapport within the context of the community'.³⁴ For instance, DET has indicated that Koorie Education Support Officers have been highly effective in increasing the enrolment of children from Aboriginal background in kindergarten with participation grown from 79.6% in 2014 to 94% in 2017.³⁵

'The style of parenting in this country is a lot different to the style of parenting in their [parents] own country...I can speak from the Turkish community because I know them so well. Even the whole understanding of education is different...we emphasise how important play is and that your child is learning [even though] you may think they're not'

– **Community Worker from Australian study**
Warr et al. 2013.

Bicultural workers have multifaceted benefits including the ability to:

- **Decrease social isolation within their communities.** Bicultural workers can leverage their cultural and social capital to identify parents and children of CALD backgrounds who are currently disengaged from services and link them to early years services.
- **Build trust and rapport** with families. When employees share the same CALD background, families can form connections, normalise their settlement experience and see a brighter future ahead for their own family.³⁶

³¹ Centre for Multicultural Youth (2011) 'Addressing the strengths and complexities of bicultural youth and family work' .

³² Woolfenden, S., Posada, N., Krchnakova, R., Crawford, J., Gilbert, J., Jursik, B., Sarkozy, V., Perkins, D., & Kemp, L. (2015) 'Equitable access to developmental surveillance and early intervention—understanding the barriers for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds' 18(6) *Health Expectation* 3286, 3293.

³³ Heneker, K.J., Zizzo, G., Awata, M., Goodwin-Smith, I. (2017) 'Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the National Disability Insurance Scheme' Australian Centre for Community Services Research, Flinders University, Adelaide, 22.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 40.

³⁵ Premier of Victoria (2018) 'Enrolling more Koorie kids at kinder', media release 4 August 2018, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/enrolling-more-koorie-kids-at-kinder>; Department of Education and Training (2018) 'Why Koorie kids shine at kinder', https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/news/Pages/stories/2017/stories_whykooriekidsshineatkinder.aspx

³⁶ Warr, D., Mann, R., Forbes, D. & Turner, C. (2013) 'Once you've built some trust: using playgroups to promote children's health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(1), 41.

- **Increase knowledge of and access to the early years system.**³⁷ Bicultural workers can explain early years processes and concepts, removing barriers of language and/or culture.
- **Ensure children receive essential support earlier.** Bicultural speech pathologists, for example, can conduct assessments in language, so that issues may be identified and treated earlier. Research shows that delays may not be recognised by allied health professionals and early years staff, who conflate delays with the burden of learning a new language.³⁸ Often children can face difficulties in understanding their speech pathologist, and interpreters often lack the specific terminology required to convey instructions.
- **Ensure services respond to emerging needs in the community.** Bicultural workers act as a bridge between families of CALD backgrounds and mainstream services. By leveraging the trust of the CALD community, bicultural workers are able to identify and advocate for emerging issues on the community's behalf.³⁹
- **Reduce a family's fear that their parenting will be 'judged' by mainstream services.** Bicultural workers who share the same culture as their clients are able to approach families of CALD backgrounds with a shared understanding of the cultural and historical norms underpinning the family's situation. This is significant in working with families who experience disability or family violence, where bicultural workers may better understand the cultural norms that underpin any associated stigma.⁴⁰
- **Ensure early years settings reflect cultural diversity and provide positive role models** for parents and children of CALD backgrounds. Modelling helps parents 'adopt new behaviours, practices and tactics, such as positive techniques for disciplining children or learning to interact with children using music and storytelling.'⁴¹ If parents see bicultural workers adopting/valuing unfamiliar early years concepts such as 'learning through play', parents may be more receptive to their use.
- **Increase cultural diversity within the workforce** and share culturally informed practice across teams to strengthen the cultural safety of the sector. Diverse workforces provide fertile ground for innovation and creativity, particularly in cross-cultural community services.⁴²
- **Promote and increase usage of services by CALD communities.** If a community member shares a positive experience with service provision, this is likely to ripple by word of mouth

³⁷Mortensen, A., Latimer, S., & Yusuf, I. (2014) 'Cultural case workers in child disability services: an evidence-based model of cultural responsiveness for refugee families' *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 9(2), 50-59.

³⁸ Centre for Community Child Health (2017) 'Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness'.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Heneker, K.J., Zizzo, G., Awata, M., & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2017) 'Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the National Disability Insurance Scheme' Australian Centre for Community Services Research, Flinders University, Adelaide, 61.

⁴¹ Warr, D., Mann, R., Forbes, D. & Turner, C. (2013) 'Once you've built some trust: Using playgroups to promote children's health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(1), 41, 46.

⁴² Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2013) 'Connections: an employer's guide to working with migrants and refugees' Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Canberra.

through to others in the community who can also benefit. These existing informal systems can be leveraged by bicultural workers to increase awareness of early years services.

Victoria has a strategic opportunity to foster the use of bicultural workers to address the shortfall of early childhood staff which will snowball as three-year-old kindergarten services are rolled out. DET currently offers incentives such as free TAFE and is planning targeted marketing to recruit bicultural staff. The current approach could be enhanced by creating a formal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy with a target to attract and retain workers from CALD backgrounds, similar to the Aged Care Workforce Strategy.

Similar bicultural recruitment targets should be adopted in the allied health sector through the creation of an Allied Health Workforce Strategy.

Workforce strategies must not only plan for recruitment of bicultural workers, but also prioritise cross-cultural responsiveness by:

- **Embedding tailored supervision for bicultural workers:** Bicultural workers can face extra tensions in their employment, such as setting effective working boundaries with other community members and navigating norms from both cultures.⁴³ Additional support and supervision tailored to bicultural workers needs to be embedded in both Workforce strategies.
- **Better quality early years training:** To build and strengthen the skillset of the sector, cross-cultural responsiveness needs to be firmly embedded in training for early childhood workers.

Recommendation 2:

Create a state-wide Early Childhood Workforce Strategy and Allied Health Workforce Strategy that:

- has targets to recruit and retain bicultural early childhood and allied health workers
- embeds tailored supervision and training for bicultural staff members
- strengthens curriculum in early childhood educator training related to cross-cultural responsiveness

Bilingual programs and resources help bridge the cultural gap

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (which is a key component of the National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care) recognises the importance of culture in a child's early development:

Culture is the fundamental building block of identity and the development of a strong cultural identity is essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they

⁴³ Enliven, Department of Health and Human Services, Monash Health Refugee Health and Wellbeing, South East Community Links, & Red Cross (2018) 'Bicultural brilliance: a toolkit for working with and as bicultural workers'.

belong. Children must have access to services that nurture, celebrate and reinforce their culture and support the development of their cultural identity.⁴⁴

Research shows that learning in another language has many benefits for all children including increased literacy, cognitive flexibility, bolstering self-esteem and wellbeing and fostering a strong sense of cultural identity.⁴⁵

Further, many families state they feel excluded from the conversations shared by parents when collecting their children from school due to language barriers. Bilingual programs provide a space for families to discuss shared successes and concerns, in their own language. Early years programs including VICSEG's bicultural playgroups and local councils' bilingual storytimes often encourage families to access and retain engagement in early years settings, while increasing children's social skills. These venues also provide a mechanism for information dissemination, trustworthy advice and guidance in the early years.⁴⁶

Bilingual programs also enable parents of CALD backgrounds to actively engage in their child's learning journey. For instance, parents share experiences from their early childhood including nursery rhymes, cultural games and traditions. We know that such engagement contributes to positive outcomes for children in their later life.⁴⁷

Studies have found that it is beneficial for children 'to experience continuity between their family cultural experiences and their nursery or preschool experiences',⁴⁸ to avoid feelings of disorientation and insecurity in the early years. Families who have bilingual storybooks are able to engage in their children's learning. Not only is reading an important bonding experience for parents and children, it develops essential cognitive skills.⁴⁹

Victoria is already doing great work to encourage the connection between children and their culture through:

'Role play in the first language makes huge difference for parents who are new in Australia. Cultural awareness and tradition play important roles in helping children develop a positive sense of identity and builds parent and child's self-esteem' –
Parent of CALD background participating in BSL's HIPPIY Program

⁴⁴Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (2011) 'Belonging, being & becoming - the educator's guide to the early learning framework for Australia', 21 –22.

⁴⁵Victorian Government (2019) 'Early childhood language program brochure'.

⁴⁶ Warr, D., Mann, R., Forbes, D. & Turner, C. (2013) 'Once you've built some trust: Using playgroups to promote children's health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(1), 41.

⁴⁷ Centre for Community Child Health (2017) 'Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness'.

⁴⁸ Young, S., & Street, A. (2010) 'Time to play: developing inter-culturally sensitive approaches to music in children's centres serving predominantly Muslim communities' Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children Conference Paper No 10, United Kingdom.

⁴⁹ Department of Education and Training (2017) 'The state of Victoria's children report'.

- **bilingual kindergartens:** In 2019, the Victorian Government supported 10 kindergartens to transition to a bilingual model. BSL hopes to see this positive initiative supported further in future years.
- **bicultural playgroups:** Recently, the Victorian Government announced a \$490,000 investment in VICSEG’s supported playgroup model for new arrivals.⁵⁰
- **MCHN offerings:** Some (but not all) MCHN providers offer CDs with bilingual nursery rhymes to parents and their children.

Recommendation 3:

Continue investing in bicultural specific services including bicultural story time, kindergarten and playgroup models.

Enrolment processes and communications can be made much easier

Early years enrolment processes can be overwhelming for families of CALD backgrounds, particularly those who have little understanding of the sector and/or limited English proficiency and literacy.⁵¹ Approaches across Victoria vary markedly, with different approaches used between services and in different LGA’s. The following table highlights both barriers and enablers in a bid to showcase promising practices.

Table 2: Communication with families of CALD backgrounds – barriers & effective practice

| Issue | Barriers to participation | Effective practice |
|--|--|---|
| Many councils do not provide translated kindergarten enrolment forms | Hume, Whittlesea, Casey and Dandenong, which have high proportions of new arrivals with limited English proficiency do not offer translated enrolment forms. Forms are often not written in ‘plain English’ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brimbank council has translated kindergarten application forms in the most common languages spoken in their LGA. • Maribyrnong council has translated videos (accessible via YouTube and their website) that explain the Central Enrolment System. |
| Interpreter use varies greatly between councils | Our families report varied experiences with MCHN and Kindergartens using interpreters to assist families. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upon intake, Maribyrnong Council assesses whether participants from refugee/asylum seeker background in their Smalltalks playgroups require support from an interpreter or a home visit. |

⁵⁰ Department of Education and Training (2019) ‘Supporting newly arrived families with playgroups’ https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/earlychildhoodupdate/Pages/ecupdate_playgroups.aspx

⁵¹ Woolfenden, S., Posada, N., Krchnakova, R., Crawford, J., Gilbert, J., Jursik, B., Sarkozy, V., Perkins, D., & Kemp, L. (2015) ‘Equitable access to developmental surveillance and early intervention—understanding the barriers for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds’ *Health Expectation* 18(6) 3286.

| Issue | Barriers to participation | Effective practice |
|--|---|---|
| Many Councils use outdated and cumbersome enrolment and communication processes | <p>Councils use letters to communicate with families at each stage of access to services. For instance, letters are sent to confirm appointment times, notify families of information evenings and confirm enrolments.</p> <p>Families who have moved house or do not understand these letters miss out on engagements, or an entire service.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCHN services are now moving away from letters to text messages to remind families of the appointment time, date and location. Families can easily translate the text message on their smart phones. • Reaching out via text message also ensures that families in transient housing receive the appointment details of the appointment if they have moved from their last known address. |
| Many councils rely on enrolment processes in venues that are not easily accessible for families | <p>Many services such as MCHN and playgroups rely on families completing an initial enrolment in a provider's office. Often families face difficulties navigating their way to the unfamiliar location. Other families can feel intimidated accessing formal services for the first time, and so choose to stay home.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brimbank Council runs multicultural and bicultural playgroups in popular and accessible community spaces such as shopping centres.⁵² These locations reduce the intimidation families may feel in accessing formal services. • Hume piloted a program where MCH nurses made their initial appointment with newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in the family's home. Families in BSL's Refugee Child Outreach program reported that this made the service approachable and easy to use. The outreach pilot has recently been suspended, owing to lack of resources. |

There is currently no mechanism for councils to share which strategies have/have not been effective in communicating with families of CALD backgrounds. Sharing of best practice is only achieved ad hoc and within siloes, such as MCHN conferences or newsletters, rather than across the sector.⁵³ BSL recommends adopting state wide principles regarding communication with these families, informed by a 'Best Practice Toolkit'.

Recommendation 4:

Promote use of state-wide best practices to strengthen communication between early years and families of CALD backgrounds (as part of our recommended Cultural Inclusiveness Toolkit), including:

- providing forms and information, including kindergarten enrolment forms, in the main languages of the surrounding community
- adopting uniform enrolment processes and simplifying forms to avoid overly complex back and forth processes
- using text messages (which can be easily translated on smart phones) to disseminate information, rather than letters

⁵² Brimbank Shopping Centre, *Brimbank Playgroup*, 2019.

⁵³ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2014) 'Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers'.

A state-wide database linking MCHN services and kindergarten would narrow the gaps families can fall through

Victoria can do more to minimise for the risk of children falling through the gaps of our siloed early years services system. Back in 2014, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office recognised the need for reform, identifying that:

There are further opportunities to improve service planning for birthing, MCH and funded kindergartens...MCH and kindergarten services are delivered under a devolved arrangement, and a clear statewide oversight mechanism has been missing. Such a mechanism could better achieve government policy objectives for these services.⁵⁴

Recent machinery of Government changes risk further siloing. MCHN services, supported playgroups and kindergartens sat within DET, but the first two have recently been relocated to DHHS, with MCHN in the Health portfolio, and supported playgroups in the Child Protection portfolio.

Victoria can mitigate this risk by linking MCHN services and kindergarten through a shared database. For instance, once a child enrolled in MCHN, with the family's consent, their information will automatically trigger a kindergarten enrolment. The database would set up alerts and appointment reminders in both services, and flag if a child is not participating in a service.

The database proposal is inspired by the mechanism that links Victoria's public and private hospitals to local MCHN services. Within 48 hours of a mother's discharge from a hospital, legislation requires that a family's information is shared with the mother's LGA.⁵⁵ Local MCHN then contacts families to book local appointments and connect them to mothers' groups. A similar model could support children and families to connect with early years services.

Recommendation 5:

Create a linked maternal child health and kindergarten information database which will operate across LGAs, alerting staff if children are not enrolled in either service.

Special measures are needed to increase the participation of children from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds

Children from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds would benefit from automatic inclusion in the Early Start program

The Early Start program provides 15 hours of free three years old kindergarten to Aboriginal children and those known to child protection.

Currently children of refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds can only access Early Start if their family situations has deteriorated to the point of seeking support from or being referred to Child FIRST. However, there is clear evidence that many more children of refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds

⁵⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2017) 'Effectively planning for population growth'.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

require more support to become school ready due to limited English proficiency, forced displacement, torture and trauma, grief and loss.

The Victorian Government is in the process of incrementally rolling out universal three-year-old kindergarten – which will provide five hours to all children by 2022, and 15 hours by 2029.

In the interim, we call on the Victorian Government to extend access to free three-year-old kindergarten to the estimated 800 children from families of refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds in Victoria. Investing in the wellbeing and development of the youngest members of refugee/asylum seeker families will lead to better life outcomes for these children by:

- increasing English language proficiency prior to school entry
- preventing, identifying and addressing developmental delays earlier
- translating into higher rates of attendance at four-year-old kinder
- delivering broader social benefits for their families and communities.

Specific targets are needed for participation of children from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds

Currently, the state's budget sets a 90% target for the enrolment of children from Aboriginal backgrounds in kindergartens. BSL recommends an equivalent target for children from refugee/asylum seeker backgrounds. This mechanism would hold services to account and place a focus on the underrepresentation of children of vulnerable CALD background in kindergartens.

Settlement services should help connect families to early years services

Federally funded settlement services are best placed to know where refugee and asylum seeker families are residing. It ought to be incumbent upon them to connect families with young children into early years services. One way of achieving this would be to require providers of Settlement Services (for humanitarian entrants) and Status Resolution Support Services (for asylum seekers) to notify the relevant LGA of a family's presence, so that they can be included on the proposed MCHN and kindergarten shared database.

Better accommodate children that arrive in Australia during the school year

While the government's Pre-Purchased Places have ensured that some vulnerable children have access to kindergarten if they miss enrolment cut-offs, many of the families we work with still face long waiting lists or are unable to access kindergarten at all, particularly if they arrive during the school year. Some families manage to secure a place a considerable distance from home, but transport barriers render kindergarten attendance unviable. Likewise, those allocated shorter timeslots over three days (rather than two full days) can face transport, cost and other logistical barriers – with drop-off/pick-up times that conflict with work or English class. As a result, many families opt out of kindergarten or attend inconsistently.

Allocation of additional pre-purchased full-day kindergarten spots for children of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds who arrive during the school year would be helpful.

Recommendation 6:

Strengthen support for children of refugee and asylum seeker background by:

- extending eligibility criteria for the Early Start program (15 hours of free three year old kinder) to children of refugee/asylum seeker background
- introducing a 90% target for enrolment of children from refugee and asylum seeker background in Victorian kindergartens
- seeking federal government agreement to require providers of Status Resolution Support Services (for families seeking asylum) and Settlement Services (for humanitarian entrants) to refer families to the recommended MCHN service and kindergarten database
- allocating kindergarten places for children of refugee/asylum seeker background who arrive after commencement of the kindergarten year.

Better address affordability issues

While the Victorian Government provides subsidies for families on a health care card and specific visa types, there are still families who struggle to pay for their child's early education. BSL works with families who face difficulties, particularly if they fall just above the health care card cut-off. Many of these parents work several jobs and have multiple children. Implementing a scaled subsidy, so that those who fall just above the health care card cut-off are able to afford the cost of kindergarten, would make a difference.

Recommendation 7:

Establish a scaled kindergarten subsidy rate to mitigate the steep jump for families whose income falls just above the health care card cut-off.

Asylum seeker children with disability or developmental delay are ineligible for NDIS, but need early intervention

Families who have experienced forced migration are disproportionately affected by disability, due to experiences of torture, trauma and displacement.⁵⁶ However, the federal government's NDIS scheme does not include children seeking asylum in their eligibility criteria.

BSL commends the Victorian Government for recognising the important and formative role that an NDIS intervention will play in these children's lives by providing funding in the 2019–2020 year to these children.⁵⁷ It is critical that this funding is continued so that these vulnerable children, many of whom will go on to be recognised as refugees and remain in Australia, receive the early intervention support they need to positively shift their trajectory.

⁵⁶ Refugee Council of Australia (2019) 'Barriers and exclusions: the support needs of newly arrived refugees with a disability'.

⁵⁷ Victorian Budget Paper No 3 2019/20.

Recommendation 8:

Provide ongoing funding to support children from families seeking asylum to access Early Childhood Early Intervention supports under the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Federal rules render them ineligible for this support.

Community ambassadors are highly effective

An Australian study found that parents from CALD and refugee backgrounds were less aware of the formative value of early childhood and early childhood education than the general population.⁵⁸

Victoria is making efforts to reach families of CALD backgrounds, including a DET sponsored marketing campaign to attract CALD communities to work in the early years sector.

Our experience has shown that who delivers the message is critical. For collectivist communities, we have found a two-way communication process brokered by community leaders is more effective than a one-way marketing strategy, such as advertisements, from government.

BSL recommends that DET engage community leaders to act as 'Community Ambassadors' who provide key education in their communities. A 'Community Ambassadors' initiative could be delivered through the existing state-funded Refugee Action Program (RAP) which partners with BSL and other service providers to build the capacity of emerging leaders within newly arrived community groups. RAP's community leaders have previously delivered 'Safer and Stronger Communities (Family Violence Prevention in CALD communities)' and the 'Rights and Responsibilities' program. Community leaders could similarly act as early childhood education ambassadors sharing messages with groups that we understand are currently underrepresented in early years services, including Arabic-speaking, Assyrian, Chaldean and Burmese/Myanmar ethnicities.

'Within the Vietnamese community new immigrants just stay in the house, kids get up late, parents are working, they don't know what playgroup is. It's just through word of mouth that gets people into playgroup. It's through networking. They stick together because they are scared of not being understood.'

– CALD service provider from Australian study commissioned by MCEECDYA (2010)

Recommendation 9:

Pilot a 'Community Ambassador' program that employs community leaders to deliver key early years messages, using the State's existing Refugee Action Program infrastructure.

⁵⁸ MCEECDYA (2010) 'Engaging families in the early childhood development story: research findings from a survey of parents of children from birth to age 8' – final project report of stage 1, Education Services Ltd.

Empowering parents as a child's first teacher leads to better outcomes

The OECD has reported that the most effective way to boost a child's later achievement is to support their parents to actively engage in learning activities at home.⁵⁹ Yet a national Australian survey found that parents of CALD backgrounds were less likely than other parents to be aware of the importance of the early years and the value of home-based learning.⁶⁰

Victoria's early years system could play a pivotal role in strengthening the capacity of parents of CALD backgrounds to create the home learning environments that are associated with good early childhood outcomes and improved long term life outcomes.

Currently, programs such as Families as First Teachers, and the BSL's HIPPY and Growing Learners (which uses the Peep Learning Together Program curriculum) programs, intentionally fostering the parent's role as first teacher.

HIPPY is highly effective in reaching families of CALD backgrounds. In Victoria, there are 18 sites, seven of which have CALD families comprising over 60% of participants including areas such as Fitzroy (85%), Dallas Broadmeadows (81%) and North Melbourne (60%).

A recent longitudinal study of HIPPY (publication forthcoming) indicates that it is changing the learning trajectory of children experiencing disadvantage by:

- building parental confidence and capacity, including through promoting warmth in parenting style
- positively impacting the home learning environment
- building school readiness. Using a pre-literacy cognitive test, the study demonstrated that on average, HIPPY children perform below Australian norms when they commence the intervention but exceed these norms upon the program's completion.

There is a need to make evidence-informed home-based learning programs available for more Victorian families. Both HIPPY and Peep are listed on the State's School Readiness Funding menu.

'In our country we wouldn't have these things, there's no playgroup, there's no child care...we don't do anything before primary school. Mothers, they don't know how they have a role before school, they have to talk to their children, teach them words, play with them, sing songs to them, they never do that. They [children] just play outside... So in Australia, it's different. All the time in the home so they have to talk to their children. All these things are new for the mothers.'

– **Emmita, parent-facilitator from Australian study Warr et al. (2013)**

⁵⁹ OECD (2012) 'Encouraging quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC), Research brief: parental and community engagement matters'; Desforges, C., & Abouchar, A. (2003) 'The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: a literature review' Research Report no. 433, Department for Education and Skills, London.

⁶⁰ MCEECDYA (2010) 'Engaging families in the early childhood development story: research findings from a survey of parents of children from birth to age 8', Education Services Ltd.

BSL is currently piloting earlier commencement of HIPPPY, so that it runs in the two years prior to school commencement, to maximise its impact.

Recommendation 10:

Increase the availability of programs that strengthen parents' capabilities in their role as their child's first teacher.

Home visits are effective in reaching families of CALD backgrounds

Visiting families at home has long been recognised as effective practice to engage families of CALD backgrounds.⁶¹ Home visits remove some of the barriers to accessing services in formal venues and provide a much-needed avenue to engage difficult to reach families that might not otherwise participate in early years education programs. And they provide a window into the home environment, which can increase visibility of other supports that may be helpful. Other benefits include:

- **Higher attendance and engagement with early years services**
- **Increased confidence for families to engage with services outside the home:** BSL's Refugee Child Outreach program visits families at home and assists them to connect with early years, health and parenting supports. Volunteers are available to accompany families to their appointments, playgroups etc. Families report that the service helps build their confidence to link into the broader community. Likewise, feedback from MCH is that their service provision is enhanced when RCO is involved as it helps families feel comfortable to access services.
- **Earlier detection of developmental vulnerabilities:** Early screening via home visits can identify children and families who are most at risk, and work with them earlier so that they do not require secondary and tertiary interventions.

'We worked with a newly arrived Congolese family with five children and a sixth on the way. I've got their four-year-old into the local kinder because the family were unsure of how to do this. I also hooked the family up with MCH and a playgroup – they didn't know these existed. I connected the mother to prenatal care and took her to have her first ever ultrasound. We also did a family visit to the library and toy library and practised some play and reading together at home with the kids. And I've helped them to get hold of the car seats that Australian law requires.'

BSL Refugee Child Outreach worker

⁶¹ Heneker, K.J., Zizzo, G., Awata, M., & Goodwin-Smith, I. (2017) 'Engaging Culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the National Disability Insurance Scheme' Australian Centre for Community Services Research, Flinders University, Adelaide.

- **Enhanced trust and rapport with service providers.** A study of the NDIS identified that ‘the main thing with CALD communities is to develop a solid relationship of trust. You begin with the trust, not with the service ... From there, they will actually respond.’⁶² Visiting families within their home environment plays a key role in building trust. Often, families are more comfortable and at ease. There is opportunity for cultural exchange and meaningful traditions such as sharing cups of tea and traditional food. Families feel a reciprocal relationship is established, which leads to more meaningful engagement with service providers, and better outcomes for children.
- **More informed and tailored interventions:** Services that visit the home can deliver content tailored to the child’s home environment. We also find that parenting strategies are more readily applied by the parent if a worker has modelled the strategy within the home environment.

Several early years services are currently piloting home visits:

Early Childhood Management Services (ECMS) have trialled a Kindergarten Access Officer role, funded by the Department of Education and Training. This seconded worker identifies children who are not engaged, visiting their home and guiding their families through the early childhood system.

Hume MCHN program completed initial intake visits with families of refugee/asylum seeker background, in their family home, although resourcing constraints have brought an end to this pilot.

In our experience, successful home visit programs use a key worker model to link families to essential services outside the home, while also enhancing a child’s home environment. BSL’s HIPPY (running in 16 Vic locations) and Refugee Child Outreach programs (philanthropically funded to run in two LGAs, with long wait lists) use this approach.

‘I like to see the MCH nurse and see how my child is going on the charts, but all would work better if they saw us at home when we have a number of kids. We are much more comfortable in the family environment, and then it is not so mechanical.

– Participant, EPEC Pacifica Project
Brimbank (2017)

We understand that the **Access to Early Learning (AEL)** program available via the School Readiness Funding Model uses a similar approach to assist families with multiple and complex needs have their children participate and remain engaged in kindergarten.

Recommendation 11:

Increase the use of home visits to maximise engagement with families by:

- preferencing early years programs that incorporate a home visit component
- resourcing Maternal Child Health to undertake initial appointments in the home where families of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds arrive in Victoria with a young child

⁶² Heneker, K.J., Zizzo, G., Awata, M., & Goodwin-Smith., I. (2017) ‘Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the National Disability Insurance Scheme’ Australian Centre for Community Services Research, Flinders University, Adelaide, 67.

Involving fathers as well as mothers in a child's early years is essential

Learning through play is acknowledged and valued in the Early Years Learning Framework of Australia, yet some of the families we work with experience 'culture shock' when exposed to this approach. Some parents remember kindergarten as a place where children wore uniforms and completed a formal academic curriculum. Usually these parents value education and wish their children to thrive academically, but do not understand the role of 'play' in this trajectory. If parents do not understand the importance of 'learning through play' they will not prioritise early years programs.

To address this issue, early years programs must engage both parents to build appreciation of the importance of play and early education. Services must intentionally involve family decision makers, particularly when activities such as kindergarten are non-compulsory.

In communities with patriarchal structures, fathers often take on the responsibility of family decisions and how finances are spent. Fathers may also acquire language more quickly than female caregivers, if they enter the job market earlier. Several Australian studies have found that fathers often acted as interpreters for their spouses and determined which services would be accessed⁶³, particularly where fees needed to be paid.

'Mum is hearing about kinder and Dad is saying, "No, they'll go to school when they're five or six and it's your job".'
 – Staff member in coordinator role, reflecting on gender norms in Australian study, Warr et al. (2013)

Engaging fathers as well as mothers has multiple benefits for children of CALD backgrounds, including:

- **Enabling access and retention of children in early years services** by ensuring a family's primary decision makers understand the importance of early childhood education
- **Fostering an understanding of the importance of learning through play**, particularly for those who have experienced different education styles in their country of origin
- **Building social capital** and community connections in local neighbourhoods by engaging the family in a child's early childhood development
- **Empowering parents** to gain valuable early childhood experience by volunteering in the classroom. This can also build a parent's vocational experience. Parents learn about the

'It is important to develop a trusting relationship between parents and services for early years. While services can be focused on the mother, it is also important at times to work flexibly with the family, including the father or extended family.'
 – Family Services team leader, BSL

⁶³ Woolfenden, S., Posada, N., Krchnakova, R., Crawford, J., Gilbert, J., Jursik, B., Sarkozy, V., Perkins, D., & Kemp, L. (2015). 'Equitable access to developmental surveillance and early intervention—understanding the barriers for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds' *Health Expectation* 18(6), 3286, 3291.; Warr, D., Mann, R., Forbes, D. & Turner, C. (2013) 'Once you've built some trust: using playgroups to promote children's health and wellbeing for families from migrant backgrounds' *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 38(1), 41.

Australian context and their rights, which they then share with other parents, either informally or through peer-to-peer mentoring models (see below).

An ongoing structural issue is that programs typically do not run in timeslots that enable primary wage-earners—often fathers—to participate. Providers rarely offer programs on weekends or after-hours. In contrast, state-funded youth programs are often required to provide weekend and after-hours opportunities for parents to engage.

Recommendation 12:

Actively engage fathers in early years settings by preferencing programs and organisations with a demonstrated commitment to involving fathers in their programs and delivering on weekends and after hours.

Peer to peer support and volunteer models assist families in navigating the early years sector

Some of the barriers families face in accessing services can be addressed head on by volunteering and peer-to-peer support models. Volunteers and peer mentors have multiple beneficial impacts including:

- **Acting as service system navigators.** Volunteers can assist newly arrived families to understand the Australian early years and health care systems and the role of different service providers.
- **Assisting parents with practical tasks** such as navigating public transport, understanding eligibility criteria, enrolment processes and the terminology of different services.
- **Decreasing social isolation and fostering social capital.** This is particularly meaningful for members of the CALD community who are separated from family networks because of either voluntary or forced migration.
- **Offering a pathway to employment.** Volunteers and mentors gain valuable occupational experience. A national survey found that volunteers from non-English speaking backgrounds felt they had gained confidence (56%) and were helped to learn a new language (54%) as a direct result of volunteering.⁶⁴
- **Increasing program efficiency and efficacy.** Volunteers free up staff, by taking on time-consuming but vital tasks, such as filling in forms and catching public transport. In our Refugee Child Outreach program, engaging volunteers has reduced waiting lists and enhanced outcomes for families facing social isolation.

‘Without the volunteer from the program I don’t think the twins and I would have gone out of the house yet.’

– Participant in BSL’s Refugee Child Outreach program

‘As a Hippy Tutor I am sharing my positive experiences with HIPPY parents, so they can understand the benefits and get advantage from HIPPY by following the HIPPY way of doing activities with their child.’

– Participant in BSL’s HIPPY program

⁶⁴ Volunteering Australia and PwC (2016) ‘State of volunteering in Australia: help create happiness’.

Victoria has existing models of volunteering and peer-to-peer mentoring that are successfully engaging members of the CALD community.⁶⁵ Examples of volunteering and peer to peer mentoring that work with the CALD community in Victoria include:

- **Refugee Child Outreach Parent Orientation Guides:** Our Refugee Child Outreach Program recruits volunteers from bicultural backgrounds, as well as the broader community, to assist newly arrived families to navigate the early years system, and offer moral support to those who have no community connections in Australia. These soft skills can often be the changing factor in a family's likelihood to engage in services.
- **HIPPY:** Uses a peer workforce of tutors who are current or past parents in the program. This provides invaluable work experience and income for parents of CALD background, whilst also providing peer support to other newly arrived parents and their children.
- **Northern Buddies:** BSL's Northern Buddies is a peer to peer community capacity building program in Melbourne's northern suburbs. Volunteers are matched with members of the CALD community to support them in navigating systems and achieving their personal goals. Volunteers also design and implement community activities, such as women's groups. Other volunteer support includes building community connections, local area orientation, English conversation classes, study support, education and employment pathways.

'Family Services refers families to Northern Buddies. This assists with social isolation for families, and throughput for programs. Families then begin the process of "normalisation" as they get the support they need without long-term welfare support.'

– Family Services Team Leader, BSL
- **VICSEG New Futures Family Mentoring:** This program improves outcomes for families of CALD backgrounds, by working with families outside the classroom while FKA Bilingual Support for children occurs in kindergarten.
- **AMES Community Guides:** AMES complements their settlement work by engaging volunteers to assist newly arrived refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants to access mainstream services such as employment, education and housing. These workers also assist families to obtain Myki's and navigate their local area.

Such approaches should be preferred in commissioning of services, with appropriate respectful recognition of volunteers' need for training, support, reimbursements for transport and other costs, role definition and regular supervision.

Recommendation 13:

Encourage and incentivise the use of mentors and volunteers in state-funded programs to support families to connect with and navigate early childhood services.

⁶⁵ AMES Australia (2019) 'Focus on: volunteering. A briefing paper'; Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011) 'A significant contribution: the economic, social and civic contributions of first and second generation humanitarian entrants' Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Place-based models create accessible, high-quality and aligned service provision

The neighbourhood in which a child grows up can have a considerable impact on their development outcomes. CALD children are among those living in the most economically disadvantaged areas of Australia⁶⁶, including areas experiencing entrenched disadvantage.⁶⁷ There will not be significant progress in addressing locational disadvantage unless the affected local communities are deeply invested in place-based solutions.⁶⁸

Community hubs – particularly those associated with universal service platforms such as schools – provide a natural focal point to align local services and efforts and engage local communities.⁶⁹

The Brotherhood is involved in several place-based hubs. The Jindi Family & Community Centre (Mernda) is a partnership of the Brotherhood, Goodstart Early Learning and Whittlesea Council. It has the following objectives:

- Children make a successful transition to school.
- Families are engaged in their child’s learning and development.
- Parents are in or have pathways to education and/or paid work.
- Families are able to manage household budgets within the income available to them and access available financial supports.
- Strong social networks connect individuals in the community.
- Community members are developing local responses that meet their aspirations and needs.

There are some promising examples of place-based hubs, notably Doveton College (profiled below) which is being replicated in 10 locations through a state/philanthropic partnership.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Centre for Community Child Health (2017) ‘Exploring the impact of community hubs on school readiness: summary report version 1.1’ Centre for Community Child Health.

⁶⁷ Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, M., Beavis, A. & Ericson, M. (2015) ‘Dropping off the edge: persistent communal disadvantage in Australia’, Jesuit Social Services & Catholic Social Services.

⁶⁸ Australian Social Inclusion Board (2011) ‘Governance models for location based initiatives’, Australian Government, Canberra; Department of Human Services (2008) ‘Neighbourhood Renewal: evaluation report 2008’.

⁶⁹ Best Start Broadmeadows Action Plan (2006); Victorian report of the Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee (2004) ‘Joining the dots’.

⁷⁰ See <https://ourplace.org.au/>

Benefits of place-based hubs for families of CALD background and their communities include:

- **A single-entry point to a range of supports:** Families can access concurrent, co-ordinated supports, multiplying the positive impact of the interventions. Place-based models that offer both health and early childhood services are more likely to build rapport with families and increase parents' knowledge of and access to other services. Parents from CALD backgrounds are more likely to discuss developmental concerns with early childhood staff, prior to seeking support from health care services.⁷¹
- **Community-driven:** With the right governance and design, hubs engage local communities in addressing local challenges and advancing local aspirations.
- **Better quality programs:** Cross-pollination means that services offered are more comprehensive than those in siloed or stand-alone environments.
- **Safe spaces:** Placing early years and health services in community hubs creates a safe, accessible space for families of CALD backgrounds and reduces fear of judgement.
- **Combating social isolation:** Families have identified that the hubs have helped them build a sense of 'family' at a time when they had few connections in Australia.

Doveton College

Opened in 2012, Doveton College was the first government and philanthropic school partnership of its kind in Australia. It seeks to respond to a complex range of community issues in an area of entrenched disadvantage. Founder Julius Colman (a refugee) has a vision for the College as a vehicle for community transformation and as a place that can engage the whole community.

Key services and supports include:

- Early Learning Centre
- Prep to Year 9 school
- A large wellbeing team focusing on local circumstances (e.g. trauma impacting humanitarian entrants)
- Parenting support
- Daily supported playgroups
- Child and family health services, including immunisation programs and maternal and child health sessions and home visits
- Family drop-in facilities
- Adult career guidance, work preparation, job search, accredited and non-accredited training programs
- Community leadership training
- Adult activity groups, including language classes, sewing, cooking
- Volunteering
- Social enterprises

Recommendation 14:

Extend and develop place-based models that align supports, resources and efforts to provide holistic support to children and their families

⁷¹ Woolfenden, S., Posada, N., Krchnakova, R., Crawford, J., Gilbert, J., Jursik, B., Sarkozy, V., Perkins, D., & Kemp, L. (2015) 'Equitable access to developmental surveillance and early intervention—understanding the barriers for children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds' *Health Expectation* 18(6) 3286, 3291.

Better data leads to better outcomes

The lack of reliable data to inform policy and program development for CALD groups has been repeatedly highlighted.⁷² In relation to early years services, the Victorian Auditor General's Office recognised the impact of poor data, in 2017 stating that the 'government lacks a sound understanding at the state and local levels of who is accessing kindergarten services and whether eligible children are missing out.'⁷³ This echoed their audit in 2014, which found a 'number of weaknesses in the available demographic data that have made service planning difficult for departments and local governments.'⁷⁴

In the absence of such data, mainstream services are unable to assess whether they are meeting the needs of Victoria's increasingly diverse population or effectively planning to meet future needs. In addition, a lack of accurate new settler data from the Commonwealth—such as ethnicity or pre-migration information—has made it difficult for states and service providers to address the needs of newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.⁷⁵ The cessation of outcome studies such as the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA) has made matters worse. Until we know the full picture of children's participation in existing services, designing and implementing effective services for children of CALD backgrounds will remain challenging.

BSL recommends that the Victorian government collects and publishes the following data from state-funded services:

- **Kindergarten and MCHN service attendance rates:** Currently kindergartens and MCHN services record enrolments, but there is no publicly available data regarding attendance.⁷⁶ Enrolments only give a limited indication of participation, as we know many families and children of CALD backgrounds face barriers to attending consistently.
- **Ethnicity:** Currently DET collects information about a child's country of birth and languages spoken at home, but not their ethnicity. Services cannot infer ethnicity from these, as many countries are home to numerous ethnicities and languages (for instance, Iraq is the birthplace of Assyrian or Chaldean people who may nominate Arabic as their language rather than Assyrian). Failing to collect this information means that service providers cannot plan programs or recruit bicultural staff to serve ethnic groups that are more at risk of missing out.

Recommendation 15:

Strengthen collection and publications of data related to engagement of children from CALD backgrounds in state-funded early years programs by:

- measuring kindergarten and Maternal Child Health attendance rates (rather than measuring enrolment rates alone)
- collecting data on children's ethnicity (rather than only country of birth and language)

⁷² Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2014) 'Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers'.

⁷³ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2017) 'Effectively planning for population growth'.

⁷⁴ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2014) 'Access to services for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers'.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

Appendix

| Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) | |
|---|--|
| Objective | HIPPY is a transformative early childhood and parenting program managed by the Brotherhood. It seeks to equip parents/carers as their child's first teacher, improve the home learning environment and build school readiness. It also puts many parents, especially women, on the path to employment. |
| Location | In 2019, the HIPPY network has grown to 100 communities across all states and territories including urban, regional, rural and remote communities. There are eighteen HIPPY sites in Victoria. |
| Duration | HIPPY is a two-year home-based program delivered in the year before school (Age 4) and the first year of schools (Age 5). BSL is currently trialling earlier commencement of HIPPY at Age 3. |
| Target group | <p>HIPPY is targeted at families experiencing disadvantage. Priority of Access (PoA) requirements mean that at least 75% of families must meet one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the household holds a Health Care Card • the HIPPY child is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander • the HIPPY child resides in out-of-home care • the family have no income or are receiving a government support payment as their primary source of income • single-parent families • the child resides with a carer (i.e. not a parent) • the main language spoken at home is not English. <p>CALD families</p> <p>The HIPPY approach resonates with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Across Australia, HIPPY families come from over 70 CALD backgrounds and live in a wide range of community environments, including small country towns, the rural/urban fringe and suburbs. In Victoria, seven sites have more than 60% of enrolled families from CALD backgrounds, including HIPPY Fitzroy (85%), HIPPY Dallas Broadmeadows (81%) and HIPPY North Melbourne (60%).</p> |
| Model | <p>A key to the program's success is that HIPPY is deeply embedded in the communities. The Brotherhood acts as the 'principal provider', and sub-licenses HIPPY to local providers – all of which are community organisations with strong local ties. The mode of delivery is unique, evidence-based and cost-effective. It involves the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a structured, 60-week curriculum of educational activities over two years delivered in the family home. The curriculum is aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework, and is flexible in practice to reflect the 100 communities involved • group meetings which connect parents to a network of peers and support in their community • participating parents can be employed as paid home tutors for future HIPPY families through the Pathways to Possibilities program. The program is tailored to increase job readiness and assist families to build occupational skills. |
| Relationship with other programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIPPY is delivered by local providers who have strong connections to their communities • HIPPY is listed on the Victorian School Readiness Funding Menu • Some HIPPY sites are represented on Communities for Children committees. |

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Funding | HIPPY is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Social Services (DSS). Opportunities are being explored to deliver HIPPY to children earlier (aged 3) through philanthropic funding. |
| Outcomes | <p>In 2019, HIPPY is delivered to over 4,500 families and has provided local jobs for around 550 coordinators, tutors and administrative staff.</p> <p>A longitudinal study of HIPPY (publication forthcoming) indicates that it is changing the learning trajectory of children experiencing disadvantage by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building parental confidence and capacity, including through promoting warmth in parenting style • positively impacting the home learning environment • building school readiness. Using a pre-literacy cognitive test, the study demonstrated that on average, HIPPY children perform below Australian norms when they commence the intervention but exceed these norms upon the program’s completion. <p>In 2018, the HIPPY parents reported the following outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents overwhelmingly reported their children made gains against the AEDC domains (such as 89% of children improved their language and cognitive skills) • 98% of parents/carers stated that their interactions with their child had improved since joining HIPPY • 43% of parents/carers reported that they had commenced paid employment since starting HIPPY • 78% of families felt more connected to their community and services. <p>HIPPY performs well when compared with 37 programs reviewed by Acil-Allen (2018) including Abecedarian and Parents as First Teachers. In terms of return on investment, HIPPY is more cost-effective, with a return on investment \$2.56 compared with Parents as First Teachers at \$1.18 and preschool return on investment of \$2 for every dollar spent.⁷⁷</p> |
| Replication or upscaling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HIPPY model has been upscaled significantly since its first program in Australia in 1998. With Australian Government funding, the number of HIPPY sites has expanded from nine in 2008 to 100 in 2019. • There is opportunity to deliver HIPPY to more families, in more locations, and commencing at an earlier age. |

⁷⁷ PwC (2019) ‘A smart investment for a smarter Australia’ The Front Project.

| Refugee Child Outreach Program (RCO) | |
|---|--|
| Objective | RCO aims to improve the developmental outcomes of refugee/ asylum seeker children by building their families' capacity to understand and access early childhood services and building the cultural responsiveness of mainstream services. |
| Location | The program operates in Hume and Whittlesea municipalities. RCO previously ran in the western suburbs (Brimbank, Maribyrnong, Hobson's Bay and Moonee Valley). |
| Duration | RCO casework is a brief intervention of approximately 3 months, including 6 weeks of intensive home-based case work support. BSL has offered the RCO program since 2005. |
| Target group | The program prioritises newly arrived families of refugee/asylum seeker background with children 0–8 years. |
| Model | <p>RCO works in partnership with families to maximise children's life chances through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing linkages to community activities • 1:1 case work support • group workshops • group activities such as excursions. <p>The program also uses volunteer support to assist families in reaching their goals. Some volunteers have experienced resettlement with young children themselves and speak community languages matched to those in the program.</p> |
| Relationship with other programs | RCO connects families to many services, including refugee health nurses, maternal health services, material aid services, playgroups, allied health and kindergartens. RCO is closely linked to MCT's Integrated Family Services program, often offering a soft entry point or a quicker engagement at crucial stages of children's development while awaiting an IFS placement. |
| Funding | Flora and Frank Leith Charitable Trust enables RCO to be staffed two days a week. |
| Outcomes | <p>RCO's model has proven effective in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • linking families into childcare, kindergartens, playgroups and early years services • building parents' understanding of the importance of play to child's learning and development by delivering play-based sessions in their home and assisting families to access play materials • facilitating linkages to speech pathologists, occupational therapists and other specialists to address developmental delays • accessing dental care. Many children in the program had very poor dental hygiene and had never seen a dentist • identifying domestic violence and connecting families to support services • supporting early years services to improve their cultural responsiveness and engagement with culturally diverse communities • reducing social isolation, particularly for single mothers • facilitating peer support that builds social capital and local networks. |
| Replication or upscaling | With funding, the program could be readily replicated and upscaled. Long wait lists exist in current locations of Whittlesea and Hume. Other areas with high demand but no service include Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Melton, Wyndham, Dandenong, Casey and Maribyrnong. |