

Explainer: South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Strategy 2026



The vision: Aboriginal children in South Australia thrive

All Aboriginal children in South Australia have the right to grow up strong in Culture. For thousands of years, Aboriginal families and Communities have shared the responsibility to care for and raise children strong, safe and connected to Culture. To honour this, education and care systems must provide Culturally responsive learning environments grounded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.

The Office for Early Childhood Development (OECD) respects that Aboriginal families are the decision makers in their child's learning journey, and we recognise families, Elders and Communities as First Teachers for Aboriginal children. We have deeply listened to these voices whose strength, knowledge and leadership will remain at the heart of this Strategy.

Why the early years matter

The early years shape a child's future learning, health and wellbeing. With 90% of brain development occurring before the age of 5, everyday interactions lay the foundations for lifelong learning.

For Aboriginal children to thrive, we need to provide access to high quality early years programs that embed strong connections to Culture, identity and belonging. Our Strategy goals are that:

- Preschool will strengthen identity and support healthy development and learning; and
- Families and Communities will experience a Culturally responsive and better-connected early childhood service ecosystem.

Investing in our vision

South Australian Aboriginal children have accessed 3-year-old preschool for decades. This Strategy responds to the recommendation of the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care to co-design measures to help Aboriginal children retain and increase these benefits with South

Australia's move to universal 3-year-old preschool. The Strategy was developed in partnership with the South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network and reflects our commitment to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

The Strategy goals will be underpinned by an historic investment, with a dedicated ongoing fund of \$35 million over the next four years and \$12.8 million each year from 2030-31. We are also investing \$5.8 million to support the Aboriginal early childhood workforce under the [South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy](#). This is in addition to the estimated benefit of more than \$40 million to 2032 for broader reforms empowering Aboriginal children, families and Communities.

Built with Aboriginal Communities

Policies and programs are most effective when they are co-designed and delivered in genuine partnership with Aboriginal people, Communities and organisations - with Aboriginal leadership at every stage of design and implementation. Aboriginal people must be at the table, shaping the design and delivery of programs that affect Aboriginal children and Communities.

With the oversight of an Aboriginal Co-design Governance Group, Aboriginal families, Elders, educators, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal peak bodies across South Australia shared their experiences, aspirations, ideas and priorities. We heard that children thrive when supported through trusted relationships in environments where children feel safe and valued.

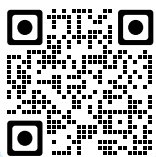
What will change

Achieving the Strategy's vision and goals requires change at every level. The Theory of Change (overleaf) underpinning the Strategy will guide the implementation of new initiatives and continue to ensure Aboriginal families, Communities and workforce are at the centre of early childhood reforms.

Measuring impact

Our Accountability Framework and co-design of an evaluation approach will measure the impact of this Strategy. Grounded in the voices and experiences of Aboriginal children and families, it will help us understand what is working well and where improvements are needed.

Regular reporting and ongoing engagement with Aboriginal Communities will help ensure the Strategy continues to respond to Community priorities and delivers better outcomes for Aboriginal children.



South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Strategy

Theory of Change / Strategy on a Page

Vision
Aboriginal children in South Australia thrive

Goals

Preschool will strengthen identity and support healthy development and learning

Families and Communities will experience a Culturally responsive and better-connected early childhood service ecosystem

Measures

3 Closing the gap Outcome
Children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years
Target: Being refreshed in 2026

4 Closing the gap Outcome
Children thrive in their early years
Target: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDO) to 55% (The South Australian 2024 baseline was 28.7%)

These will be achieved through

System and service level elements

There is accountability to Aboriginal Communities and commitment to Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Families understand child development and are more aware of the benefits of 2 years of preschool

Early childhood education and care and other family services are well connected

All preschools are Culturally responsive, and there is more proactive and positive engagement with Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing

Families are decision-makers

Barriers to engagement are reduced

Families have more choice about attending a well-supported Aboriginal Community-Controlled service

Child and family level elements

Our vision will be delivered by phased investment in new initiatives in addition to: mandated Aboriginal Cultural Safety Training for preschools, the Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy, ACOO Integrated hubs, Child Health and Development screening, ongoing Aboriginal Governance, the Words Grow Minds First Nations campaign, Preschool hours uplift in the Department for Education, Sector Strengthening Initiatives and the Flying Start Infrastructure Grants Program – ACOO stream.

New actions to drive change

+ Quarantined funding for: evaluation, collateral governance and further co-design, implementation staffing, and capacity/capability peak and responsive grants



Phase 0:

Immediate opportunities

OECD Aboriginal branding

Phase 1:

Build momentum

Fee relief

SA Aboriginal Preschool Communication Strategy

Strengthening ACOOs Infrastructure Fund

SA Early Years Support service + Advocacy



Phase 2:

Build relationships

Community Liaison Officers (Lunkers)

Tailored ACOO funding models



Phase 3:

Embed in practice

Aboriginal Playgroup Strategy



Phase 4:

Amplify success

Place-Based Self-Determination Funds

Elders in Residence

This approach reflects our starting point and opportunity...

...to build on decades of an existing Aboriginal 3-year-old entitlement

...as a part of a universal, whole of sector roll out that enables us to design new approaches and reach all children

...with a mandate, dedicated funding and aligned Closing the Gap and Sector Strengthening commitments

And is underpinned and informed by corresponding fundamental principles and enablers of design and delivery:

Principles

Learn and iterate: leave room for growth, reflection and change

Build on early momentum and engagement from Community

Focus on core, impactful priorities

Set up for success: reduce and resource implementation burden; build capacity; be flexible

Create coherence: aligned to national, state and OECD programs and reforms

Enablers

Aboriginal leadership

Shared decision-making

Embedding Cultural ways of knowing, being and doing

Ongoing investment aligned to agreed outcomes

Robust governance and Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Transparent, Aboriginal informed accountability frameworks