



Thursday 21 – Friday 22 May 2026

Cairns Convention Centre | Australia

# BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Conference theme

‘Inspire. Collaborate. Act.’



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# KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

## 1. In Conversation with Anne Hollonds AO

*Keynote Anne Hollonds*



**Abstract:** Anne Hollonds will share some learnings and reflections from her term as Australia's National Children's Commissioner 2020-2025. Currently as the CEO of The Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, Anne has a focus on child safety, rights and wellbeing in the early years

**Biography:**

**Anne Hollonds AO** is the CEO of the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia (ELACCA). ELACCA members provide education and care to 360,000 children across Australia.

Anne recently concluded her term as Australia's National Children's Commissioner 2020-2025. Part of the Australian Human Rights Commission, this role monitors policy and legislation to ensure that the human rights of children are protected and promoted and provides advice to governments. Her report [\*'Help Way Earlier!' How Australia can transform child justice to improve safety and wellbeing\*](#) was tabled in the Australian Parliament in 2024 and was closely followed by a Senate Inquiry into Youth Justice reform.

Anne was formerly the Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and Chief Executive of non-government organizations focused on policy, practice and research in child and family wellbeing.

As a psychologist, Anne has worked extensively in frontline practice, including in child protection; domestic, family and sexual violence; mental health; child and family counselling; parenting education; and family law counselling. Anne contributes to several expert advisory groups.

## 2. Digital technology use in early childhood: How harmful is it and what can we do about it?

Keynote Associate Professor Dylan Cliff



**Abstract:** Australian parents rank digital screen use as the most significant health issue facing our children. These concerns are influenced by the reported harms to children’s development and health of too much screen time, and reports that many children don’t meet national screen time limits. But while some types of digital screen use or contexts surrounding digital screen use might be harmful to children’s development, others might be less concerning or even beneficial. In this presentation I will provide an overview of the latest evidence on the associations between the dimensions of children’s digital screen use (i.e., screen time, content types, and screen contexts) and their health and development. In light of this evidence, I will discuss Early Childhood Australia’s revised *Statement on young children and digital technologies (2025)* and the *American Academy of Pediatrics’ Policy Statement: Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents (2026)*. The evidence and guidance statements will be interpreted to assist adult caregivers and early childhood educators in understanding how to best support children to grow up happy and healthy in an increasingly digital world.

**Biography:** Dylan Cliff is a researcher and lecturer in the School of Education and Early Start at the University of Wollongong. His research focuses on supporting children’s development and health through investigating their electronic screen use contexts, such as the types of technology and content children engage with, whether children engage alone or with others, and how long children engage for. He also has expertise in children’s physical activity and sedentary behaviour.

Dylan has co-authored more than 150 publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, edited book chapters and government reports. He has been a leadership group member for the development of four sets of national physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines for the Australian Department of Health, including for the Early Years (2017), Children and Young People (2018) and Adults and Older Adults (2025). These guidelines have included recommendations on electronic screen use and health. He subsequently provided technical advisory to the World Health Organization. Dylan has led and contributed to research supported by more than \$75 million in research funding. He is a Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council-funded Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, where he Co-leads the Healthy Child research program. The Digital Child Centre involves more than 200 members, including researchers and industry partners across 16 countries. Dylan aims for his research to contribute to a world where digital technology enhances children’s development, connectedness and wellbeing, and where risks of harm can be minimised.

### 3. Creating safety, protection and healing in relationships for at risk and traumatised children: The critical role of Early Years Professionals

*Keynote Janise Mitchell*



**Abstract:** Early years educators sit at the frontline of protection, safety and healing for children who have experienced, or are vulnerable to, abuse, family violence and the trauma it causes. Long before specialist services become involved, it is the everyday relational world of early learning settings that shapes a child's sense of safety, belonging and possibility. This keynote explores why the relationships early years professionals build with children are not simply supportive extras but offer powerful protective and therapeutic conditions that buffer stress, restore trust and lay the foundations for lifelong wellbeing.

Drawing on the principles of trauma-transformative practice, the session reframes trauma not as a behavioural issue but as a disruption to safety, connection, meaning-making and development. It highlights how predictable routines, attuned interactions, and emotionally available adults create the relational safety that traumatised children need to regulate, explore and learn. Early Years professionals will be invited to see themselves as relational anchors - people who hold children in moments when their bodies and brains are overwhelmed, and who help them experience the world as safe again.

The keynote will unpack the dimensions of trauma-transformative practice most relevant to early years settings: cultivating safety and predictability; strengthening relational connection; and creating environments where children's voices, rhythms and needs guide practice. It will illuminate how small, everyday relational gestures such as shared play, co-regulation, deep listening and gentle curiosity can interrupt the impacts of trauma and build safety, trust, confidence and hope. Early years professionals are critical agents of protection and healing. By understanding the profound influence of their relationships, educators can transform trajectories for children, ensuring that early learning environments become places where safety is restored, trust and connection are strengthened, and healing can begin.

**Biography:** Janise Mitchell is CEO, Australian Children's Foundation and Director of the Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care. She is also an Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Arts and Social Sciences with Southern Cross University.

Janise has more than 38 years' experience in the field of child trauma. She completed a Master of Social Work (Research) in 2008 in therapeutic foster care, being instrumental in the development of therapeutic care in Australia for 25 years. Janise is a founding Board member of the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse and Board member of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

She has extensive experience in the development of innovative therapeutic programs for traumatised children and young people. Janise has provided consultancy to many governments on the issue of therapeutic services for children and young people and regularly participates in state and national Advisory Groups seeking to address the needs of children and young people in the child protection, out of home care, secure care and youth justice sectors. Janise has a commitment

to evidence-informed practice and believes strongly in the participation of young people in the development of services, policies and programs that seek to support them.

Janise has presented nationally and internationally and has a range of publications including: *The Handbook of Trauma-Transformative Practice: Emerging Therapeutic Frameworks for Supporting Individuals, Families or Communities Impacted by Violence*: Edited by Joe Tucci, Janise Mitchell, Stephen W Porges and Ed Tronick, 2024, London: Jessica Kinglsey Publishers.

*The Handbook of Therapeutic Care for Children: Evidence-Informed Approaches to Working with Traumatized Children and Adolescents in Foster, Kinship and Adoptive Care* edited by Janise Mitchell, Joe Tucci and Ed Tronick, 2019, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

#### 4. How can infant mental health contribute to better developmental and emotional outcomes for young children?

*Keynote Associate Professor Campbell Paul*



**Abstract:** Over recent decades, our understanding of the inner world, emotional development, and the relationship development of infants over the first three years of life has grown exponentially. The baby has much to tell us about the impact of adversity and trauma upon the child's development, and upon the family itself. We have learned that from birth the baby is able to perceive important day-to-day, and troubling communications from their carers, and to reciprocate in a real and a lively way. Consequently, we have become increasingly aware of the human rights of infant, toddlers and preschoolers. The behaviour of the infant and young child has real meaning; and meaning to which we should respond thoughtfully and consistently. There are many tools, for example the Newborn Behaviour Observation (Nugent 2007), with which we can understand the infant and their key relationships, and this understanding can lead to powerful therapeutic interventions. The baby has taught us much about human relationship development, and how understanding relationships can make a big difference the baby and family, and their caring professionals.

**Biography:** Campbell Paul is a Consultant Infant and Child Psychiatrist at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and Honorary Principal Fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Melbourne. He is President Elect of the World Association for Infant Mental Health.

With colleagues at the University of Melbourne, he has established and delivered postgraduate courses in Infant and Parent Mental Health since 1992. He has a special interest in the understanding of the inner world of the baby, particularly as it informs therapeutic work with infants and their parents. With colleagues he has developed psychotherapeutic models of working with troubled parents and infants. He has found the NBO (Newborn Behavioural Observations) to be a powerful intervention to enhance the early parent-infant relationship. He is a master trainer and Director of NBO Australia, the national NBO training program for professionals based at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne.

# DAY ONE: SESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

## THURSDAY MORNING

### **Safe Othering: Managing Tensions Between Honouring Difference and Promoting Inclusion - Findings from Two Educator Dialogics**

*Susan Sharpe, Principal Education & Research Advisor, The Creche & Kindergarten Association (C&K)*

Othering, a set of dynamics, processes, behaviours, and structures through which individuals or groups are perceived as fundamentally different or inferior, often reinforces social hierarchies. In early childhood education and care (ECEC), othering can negatively impact children's identities and relationships, leading to feelings of exclusion, shame, and lack of belonging. Families who experience unsafe othering may lose trust and connection with educators. This presentation explores the concept of "safe othering" through findings from two dialogic sessions with early childhood educators and professionals. In these sessions, open-ended questions and visual prompts were used to facilitate conversations about how differences can be acknowledged without reinforcing exclusion. Participants were invited to share their experiences of how unsafe othering manifests and the associated tensions, such as affirming cultural identities without tokenism, managing unconscious bias, and embedding inclusive practices without marginalising others. The findings highlighted the complexity of acknowledging difference in ways that empower and support psychological and cultural safety, as well as strategies that can be used to practise safe othering in ECEC settings. This research contributes to the domains of positive identity and culture and feeling valued.

### **Building Brains and Bodies**

*Roger Meany (presenter), Convenor (Brains and Investment), Queensland Kids Partnership & Louise Denoon, Executive Director, Community Partnerships State Library of Queensland*

For children to be healthy, loved and safe, we need more leaders, practitioners, caregivers and workplaces that are building thriving childhoods and more strategies, policies, programs and investments that are developing the capabilities and relationships children, young people, families and communities need to be connected, resilient and thriving. Across Queensland we have 100,000s of skilled people working with children and young people every day. When we equip and support the people who work directly with children with the latest evidence, we see huge benefits for children now and into the future. We also see benefits for adults and their workplaces. Because when we're all well supported with evidence-based tools, we can do our jobs better and with less stress. QKP provides curated learning and development to strengthen core, common and contemporary knowledge, skills and tools across Queensland workforces and organisations. Collaborative initiatives provide the building blocks for healthy brains and bodies by building an ecosystem that is equipped and coordinated to improve opportunities, capabilities and outcomes so all Queensland kids have a great start and journey in life. This presentation will provide examples of embedding capabilities and resources in a flexible way that can be adapted to each workplace's needs.

## **Building Resilience Together: Early Years Disaster Forums as a Model for Cross-Sector Collaboration**

*Dr Sharleen Keleher, ECEC Infant Mental Health Statewide Coordinator, Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health & Dr Anita Eggington, Disaster Resilience, Queensland Kids Partnership*

This presentation showcases the Early Years Disaster Forums, three innovative collaborative events held across Far North Queensland, Gold Coast, and Scenic Rim (2024-2025), demonstrating how cross-sector partnerships strengthen disaster resilience for infants, children, and families. The forums brought together early childhood educators, health professionals, emergency services, local government, and community organisations to collaborate through coordinated action and resource and knowledge sharing. Participants developed shared strategies for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, creating practical community action plans tailored to local contexts. Key outcomes include enhanced professional networks, increased awareness, knowledge and confidence to prepare services, staff, families and children to respond to and recover from future events and strengthened community capacity. The model demonstrates how locally led; trauma-aware approaches can act to address identified gaps in supporting young children through disasters. This presentation will provide delegates with a replicable framework for establishing similar forums in their communities, practical tools for cross-sector engagement, and evidence-based strategies for improved early childhood disaster resilience. The forums align with multiple wellbeing domains: ensuring children feel valued, loved and safe during disasters, maintaining access to physical and mental health support, and protecting continuity of learning through strengthened early childhood service resilience and recovery planning.

## **Many Hands, Many Voices: Many Hands, Many Voices – Sharing our experiences in creating a model of early childhood education for First Nations Children”**

*Dr Fran McCarthy, Director, Charli Greenhalgh & Sylah Costelloe, Community Xchange*

We would like to share the story of Murray-Toola Damana Preschool, a community-led Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preschool in Mount Druitt, Sydney. Our preschool was created through deep listening with Elders, families, and community members who wanted a learning place where children could grow strong in culture, identity, and belonging. Our name, Murray-Toola Damana—gifted by the custodian of the Darug language—means “many hands.” It reflects the way this preschool has been built together. Our educational approach is grounded in a six-year research thesis and shaped by the lived experiences, hopes, and strengths of our community. It is trauma-informed, relational, and culturally responsive. We began in February 2022 with just two children. Today, we have over 50 children learning, laughing, exploring, and thriving with us. In this presentation, we will share the journey: the challenges, the guiding principles, the small triumphs, and the deep joy that comes from creating a place where culture is not an “add-on,” but the heart of all we do.

## **What the Heck is Emotional Regulation? A Neuroscience-Based Framework to build safe and thriving learning communities**

*Daisy Ramsden, Co-CEO, Abundant Education Consultancy*

How we act on our emotions and thoughts shapes not only our lives but the future of learning and society. Yet emotional regulation remains one of the least understood human skills. Across homes and classrooms, parents and educators are on the frontlines of shaping this capacity, yet many reported feeling burned out searching for practical ways to support children's emotional needs while managing their own. The Emotional Seasons™ framework was developed to change this—making emotional regulation visible, teachable, and practical. Grounded in psychology, neuroscience, and learning theory, it provides a simple, holistic roadmap helping adults and children recognise, regulate, and co-regulate emotions in real time. Implemented in family and early childhood settings, the framework equips parents and educators with step-by-step tools— including visual aids, reflective language, play and co-regulation strategies. Participants report calmer homes and classrooms, stronger relationships, and greater confidence navigating challenging behaviours. Aligned with ARACY's domains of Healthy, Valued, Loved & Safe, and Identity & Culture, Emotional Seasons™ bridges emotional wellbeing with learning outcomes. When parents and educators model emotional regulation, they don't just teach it—they shape the next generation's capacity for compassion, resilience, and connection.

## **The Anxiety Epidemic: How we got here, and how understanding Play is the key!**

*Kylie Ellison, Director/Registered Counsellor, Kylie Ellison Therapy and Training*

The education setting is facing a crisis: children more than ever are presenting with significant levels of anxiety, separation anxiety and struggling to cope. It can feel powerless as an educator to help when children have such big emotions, but there is hope- play! This workshop will offer the tools to understand children's play, to effectively communicate with them and support positive outcomes in your work with children. This workshop will cover: - How we got here- what the research says on the rise of anxiety in children; - Why Play is important, how access to play is declining in our communities and the impact it is having on children's mental health; and - Practical communication skills in Play Therapy to apply to your connections with children. Make sure you bring your most playful self to this workshop- because once you attend, you will never be able to see children's play the same way again!

## **Education Benalla Program - how place-based collaboration is improving children's school readiness in a persistently disadvantaged community in regional Victoria**

*Sally Matheson, Education Benalla Program Manager & Dr Jen Jackson, Executive Officer, Tomorrow Today*

Tomorrow Today's Education Benalla Program is an ambitious community-wide program to improve educational outcomes and create a better future for our persistently disadvantaged district. The program

is recognised as a leading Australian example of the collective impact approach to tackling complex community issues. Tomorrow Today facilitates the Benalla Early Years Network, bringing together representatives from preschools/schools, family support, health, and welfare services to discuss emerging issues impacting children's development. Ten different activities are offered through our Early Years sub-program. We actively collaborate with local services aiming to see Benalla's children start school ready to learn. Program partners refer children/families into our programs, provide venues for programs to run from, and are guest speakers at our Parents' Early Education Partnership weekly group sessions. Collaborative activities include Engaging community volunteers to support parents in their child's first 1,000 days, and to support children's literacy and oral language development in preschool settings. Working with parents to strengthen their parenting skills, knowledge of healthy child development, and preparation for the transition to school. Supporting the development of preschoolers' pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and oral language skills. Over the past 15 years, we've seen: 80% of families engage in PEEP improved rates of healthy early childhood development.

## **Child Development Milestones Checklist: A new resource to monitor children's development**

*Kym Dunstan, Project Officer & Claire Benham, Director, Child Development Program, Children's Health Queensland*

On Track Together, developed by Children's Health Queensland's Child Development Program, is a new developmental milestones resource designed to replace the widely used Red Flags Early Identification Guide. It empowers families and educators to monitor children's development, engage proactively with health professionals, and access support early. Using a rapid literature review, consumer feedback (215 survey respondents, 15 focus group participants) and clinical consultation, the team collaboratively designed a new resource, which was further tested with consumers and clinicians before being launched. Review of the previous guide indicated these updates: evidence-based, 75th% centile as the threshold for milestones, strengths-based and inclusive language, increased access of reputable information to families, educators, and professionals. The process encourages visits with their child health nurse or GP as part of health development. This shift reflects a commitment to collaboration and early action, aligning with ARACY's Common Approach and the growing evidence around the importance of the first 2000 days. On Track Together fosters shared responsibility between families, educators, and health professionals, encouraging timely conversations and connections that support children to stay well, learn, and grow. It's a new way of working together.

## **Reframing Playgroup Success through an Indigenous Lens**

*Bettina Williams, Child Development Specialist, The Benevolent Society*

In many Western frameworks, playgroups are often evaluated by attendance metrics—more participants equate to more funding, which in turn supports more elaborate programming. However, this approach can overlook the deeper, more meaningful outcomes that arise from culturally grounded connection. As an Aboriginal woman working within these systems, I've witnessed firsthand how Indigenous-led

playgroups—such as Baby and Me, Play and Learn, and Connect to Culture—serve as living, breathing examples of real-time research. These groups don't just offer play; they offer cultural continuity, healing, and community building. When culture is embedded in every aspect of a playgroup, it lays the foundation for positive outcomes that ripple through families and communities. It also creates space for cross-cultural collaboration, where other cultures feel welcomed and valued, enriching the group experience for everyone. Rather than placing Indigenous facilitators under a generic “jarjum” label, it's time to recognize the unique strengths and approaches they bring—ones that prioritize relationships, storytelling, and cultural safety over numbers alone.

## **Building Cultural Capacity in Early Childhood – Pacifikai “Train the Trainer” Initiative**

*Debra Thompson, Multicultural Health Worker, Queensland Health*

This initiative is a collaboration between Pacifikai (Children's Health Queensland) and Waratah Early Education Centre in Cairns, aimed at strengthening identity, culture, and health outcomes for Māori and Pacific Islander families focusing on Identity and culture and health (ARACY). It centres on the development and delivery of culturally safe, Pacific-led healthy lifestyle programs for children aged 3–4 years in early childhood education settings. Method: The “Train the Trainer” program, launched in 2019 and updated in 2025, equips educators to deliver culturally safe, Pacific-led health sessions. Guided by Pacifikai, it aligns with ACECQA Quality Areas 2 and 6, supporting Māori and Pacific Islander children in early learning settings. Results: The target group is 3–4-year-olds in the kindy room with a Pacific Island demographic of 15–20%. KAP data is collected to provide measurable outcomes and trends. Evaluation: Upskilling Educators to facilitate culturally safe sessions with the support of Pacifikai, long term sustainable program, professional development and ACECQA aligned. Key message: Sustainable lifelong cultural education for healthy lifestyles with children from Māori and Pacific Islander families to reduce the burden of chronic diseases.

## **THURSDAY AFTERNOON**

### **Embedding Inclusive Practices in Early Childhood Education through Reflective and Intentional Teaching**

*Nicole Gentile, Educational Leader, Mini Masterminds Early Learning*

This project explores the implementation of inclusive education practices within an early childhood setting, drawing on 14 years of professional experience and reflective practice. Grounded in the principle that true inclusion extends beyond presence to ensure belonging, participation, and equity, the project examines how intentional teaching, and environmental adaptation can promote meaningful inclusion. The aim was to identify and model practical strategies that support all children, regardless of ability or background, as capable and valued learners. Using a qualitative, reflective case study approach, examples were drawn from real classroom experiences, including supporting a deaf child through AUSLAN integration and adapting sensory and literacy experiences to meet individual needs. Findings revealed that authentic inclusion occurs when educators adapt programs, materials, and interactions to reflect children's strengths and identities, rather than expecting children to conform to set routines. This

project highlights the importance of reflective practice, team collaboration, and continuous professional learning to sustain inclusive environments. Key message: Inclusion is not a program—it is a mindset and daily practice that ensures every child feels valued, represented, and capable.

## **From Policy to Practice: Implementing the Healthy Kindy Kids Program in Queensland**

*Rachael Beswick, Director, Department of Health*

Healthy Kindy Kids is a new Queensland Government initiative providing free vision, hearing, and speech and language checks for all children attending a government-approved kindergarten program. Through collaboration between the health and education sectors, the program aims to increase access for all families and promote equity for children experiencing adversity. Launching with a pilot in Townsville in October 2025, Healthy Kindy Kids will progressively expand across Queensland, reaching every eligible kindergarten by the end of 2027. The pilot involves five kindergartens and approximately 130 children, co-designed with cross-sector partners and guided by expert advice on service models, workforce, consent and referral processes, and data systems. Evaluation focuses on participation and consent rates, the feasibility and utility of screening tools, and outcomes for children, families, and sectors. Healthy Kindy Kids strengthens early identification and support for children's development before school and advances the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) wellbeing domains of Being Healthy and Learning. It demonstrates how integrated, cross-sector action can translate policy into meaningful gains for children's wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

## **Using Social Media as an Educational Tool**

*Fiona Nave, Principal Lead – First 2000 Days, Health and Wellbeing Queensland*

Preconception health is crucial for child and generational outcomes, as many biological and epigenetic processes occur before pregnancy. Preconception care addresses modifiable risk factors such as nutrition, physical activity, smoking, alcohol and vaccinations, benefiting both men and women of reproductive age. However, awareness remains low among the public and health professionals compared to antenatal care. In Australia, only half of GPs are aware of preconception guidelines, with barriers like time and resources limiting implementation. Public understanding is also limited. Risk factors are widespread: 11% of Queensland mothers smoke during pregnancy, 6% consume alcohol, half enter pregnancy overweight or obese, and 95% of adults do not meet fruit and vegetable guidelines. The Preconception Health Promotion Trial (PHPT) aims to address these gaps through a 6-month campaign in Mackay and Ipswich (ends Apr 2026). Using public health messaging and digital marketing, it seeks to raise awareness, shift and empower individuals and clinicians. The presentation will share evaluation data and insights from using social media as an educational tool, to enable conference attendees to apply these findings for their own digital health communication – understanding which platforms, format, and timing strategies most effectively deliver key messages for maximum reach and impact.

## **Building a brighter future. Enabling families to drive early intervention in a community infant playgroup**

*Madeline Mayberry, Senior Speech Pathologist, The Benevolent Society*

Background Quality foundational supports should consider the needs of infants in the context of their whole family, so support is tailored, and families are the drivers of the intervention for their child. Yet the parent voice is often missing when programs are designed ‘for’ families. Method Our First Steps group is run in a community EYP and is aimed at babies under 18 months with developmental concerns. The group is part of the Benevolent Society’s NDIS Early Supports program facilitated by a Speech Pathologist, Physiotherapist and Early Childhood Teacher. 2 Focus groups of 8-10 parents/carers, and 8-10 key stakeholders including a First Nations’ reference group and Lady Gowrie EYP will be consulted on the content and design of group sessions/ resources including a drafted parent handbook, journal and information material. Evaluation What kinds of foundational supports do families and professionals value in a targeted infant group, and how families be authentically involved in the co-design of the program and its resources? Key message Our project explores how a community playgroup provides space for authentic collaboration with families to shape a future model of multi-disciplinary early intervention for young children with developmental concerns.

## **True Early Intervention: Building Family Capacity through Supported Playgroups**

*Caterina Veidt, Speech Pathologist & Olivia San Gil, Team Leader, Individual Support Services, Act for Kids*

In partnership with Mission Australia, Act for Kids has delivered the Little Leaps Supported Playgroup for 18 months in Cairns’ southern corridor. Grounded in the Abecedarian Approach, the program fosters enriched early learning through intentional play, responsive adult–child interactions, and language development. Little Leaps adopts a holistic, ecological model, addressing parent and child needs via allied health involvement, therapeutic assessment, and attachment-focused strategies. Integrating Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) PACE, the program strengthens caregiver capacity, attachment security, and emotional regulation. It aligns with ARACY’s The Nest framework, promoting six domains of child wellbeing: being loved and safe, having material basics, being healthy, learning, participating, and having a positive sense of identity and culture. During the most recent quarter, 8 weekly playgroup sessions were delivered, supported by in-home sessions as needed. Five parents and seven children participated; one child did not attend due to full-time day care. Participants included 2 CALD children, 6 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, and 1 child with autism spectrum disorder. Parents reported satisfaction with activities, improved engagement, and application of attachment-based strategies. Two parents observed measurable developmental benefits in their children. Evaluation via parent surveys, informal observation, and DP-4 profiles demonstrate the program’s effectiveness in building family capacity, enhancing parent–child interaction, and supporting early learning outcomes.

## **Speaking Up, Reaching Out - Collaborating with families about their child's development**

*Rhi Sugars, Director, The Atypical Educator*

Relationships are essential in the early childhood sector, not just with the children in attendance but their families also. When a child is showing characteristics of developmental difference, these relationships are more important than ever. Yet when faced with talking to families about their children's development, many educators find themselves in a state of analysis paralysis. Even the most confident of educators, who consider themselves to have strong relationships with their families, can find it challenging to bring up the topic of developmental or behavioural differences. This session will empower educators to navigate tricky conversations with confidence and equip them with an understanding of neuroaffirming approaches to developmental differences. This session also utilises lived experience to demonstrate the importance of viewing disability through the social model to support young people with developmental differences to build positive self-identities and encourage their families to collaborate throughout the assessment and early intervention process. Session participants will have the opportunity to create their own early intervention stakeholder lists, share their own experiences and will leave with resources to share with their communities.

## **National trends in child development at school entry – Insights from 15 years of the AEDC**

*Tess Gregory, Principal Research Fellow & Yasmin Harman-Smith, Head, Early Years Systems Evidence, The Kids Research Institute Australia*

**Background and rationale:** Since 2020, the early life experiences of children growing up across Australia have been profoundly altered. The impact on their development is still being understood. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national, triennial census of child development providing valuable insights to help explore this question. **Methods:** We analysed data from six waves of the AEDC (2009 to 2024) with around 300,000 children (~95% participation rate) captured in each wave of the AEDC. Trends in domain and sub-domain results were explored nationally, as well as differences based on children's state/territory of residence, geographical remoteness and socio-economic disadvantage of the community they live in. **Results:** The percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more domains increased from 22.0 in 2021 to 23.5 in 2024. The percentage of children developmentally vulnerable increased across all five AEDC domains with the largest shifts seen in social competence and emotional maturity. **Implications for practice:** Developmental outcomes vary markedly depending on where, when and how Australia children grow up. Results provide valuable insights for stakeholders working the Early Years to help plan and program for children's development during times of social and economic upheaval.

## **Strengthening Early Years Partnerships: A Collaborative Model Between Community Hearing Screening and the Department of Education Early Years Connect Team**

*Mikaela Dammers, Advanced Audiologist Program Manager, Healthy Hearing, Queensland Health*

**Background and Rationale:** Undetected hearing loss in children can significantly impact speech, language, and educational outcomes. Recognising this, a partnership was formed between Children’s Health Queensland Community Hearing Screening and the Department of Education, to improve early identification and support for children with hearing concerns. **Method:** A collaborative framework was established to deliver hearing screening in Queensland’s most vulnerable schools. Stakeholders from both sectors co-designed protocols, communication pathways, and consent processes. Pilot programs were implemented, with data collected on detection rates, referral outcomes, and family feedback. **Results:** The partnership led to the successful development and endorsement of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that formalises roles and responsibilities. Additionally, an individualised consent form was co-developed to streamline referral pathways. **Implications for Practice:** This model demonstrates the value of cross-sector collaboration in addressing public health needs within educational settings. The MOU and consent framework offer a scalable template for statewide adoption, ensuring equitable access to early hearing detection and intervention. **Key Message:** Cross-sector collaboration between health and education can successfully improve early hearing detection in vulnerable school populations, leading to scalable frameworks—like a statewide MOU and culturally responsive consent forms—that enhance access, engagement, and long-term outcomes for children and families.

## **Walking Together: Embedding Culture, Connection and Care**

*Emily Gerber, Kindergarten Director & Brittany Kinsmore, Koorie Families as First Educators- Senior Case Worker Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative Kindergarten*

At Djimbaya Kindergarten and Early Years, we enact meaningful change through a culturally safe, wellbeing-focused, and relational approach to early learning. Guided by our “Love Pedagogy,” we create environments where children and families feel safe, valued, and deeply connected. Our work aligns with the ARACY wellbeing domains, especially Valued, Loved + Safe, Positive Identity + Culture, and Healthy Emotional, Physical, Mental development. We support children, families, and Community who are often under-supported due to systemic barriers, prioritising strengths-based, relational, and culturally responsive practice. Aboriginal ways of knowing and being are embedded through kinship-informed practice, storytelling, and connection to Country—recognising that healing and learning happen best in relationship. Love Pedagogy aligns with Aboriginal cultural values by centring care, reciprocity, and relational responsibility. It honours children’s autonomy, emotional expression, and cultural identity, positioning educators as co-regulators, cultural allies, and trusted adults, while empowering families as their child’s first educator and strongest advocate. Collaboration is central to our practice. Djimbaya Kinder works closely with our onsite Maternal Child Health Nurse to support holistic wellbeing, and with Balert Gerrbik practitioners to embed Aboriginal cultural knowledge, healing practices, and community connection. These partnerships allow us to act early, respond meaningfully, and build trust. Our presentation will share practical strategies—including staffing models, sensory regulation supports,

cultural programs, and collaborative care pathways—that delegates can adapt to improve outcomes in their own settings. We aim to inspire action through a strengths-based lens that uplifts children, families, and educators alike.

## **Trusting Partnerships: Early Identification and the Power of Collaboration in School Transitions**

*Anita Cubit, Principal & Lisa St Pierre, Early Years Support Coordinator, Wonga Beach State School*

At Wonga Beach State School in Far North Queensland, children and families are welcomed well before their first day of Prep. Through its Playgroup — run by an external provider with school support — alongside KindyLinQ and the State Delivered Kindy program, the school has become a living example of how a small rural school can thrive as an Early Years Gateway, embodying the 2026 conference theme: Inspire. Collaborate. Act. Our model shows that trusting partnerships and early identification of support form the foundation for lifelong learning success. The Early Years Support Coordinator (EYSC) plays a central role in linking families, educators, and community services so that developmental, social, and emotional needs are identified early. By coordinating across programs and partners, the school builds a connected network around families. The results are powerful: children begin Prep confident and settled; families feel supported and valued; and educators start with the insight they need to help every child thrive. Our work is not done — it continues in every conversation, every connection, and every child whose story is still being written.

## **No Limits: Building Equity Through Oral Language and Literacy in Preschool Communities**

*Natalie Brass & Sarah Hughes, Coach & Co-Directors, SailAway Readers*

Educational inequity begins early, with children in disadvantaged communities more likely to start school developmentally vulnerable, particularly in oral language (Brushe et al., 2021). On the Mornington Peninsula and in Frankston in Victoria, vulnerability rates are significantly higher than state averages, with some communities seeing nearly half of children at risk across multiple domains. Recognising that oral language underpins later literacy and life outcomes, the Mornington Peninsula Foundation, Community Kinders Plus and SailAway Readers partners to deliver the No Limits program to address these challenges. No Limits represents an innovative, place-based collaboration that builds teacher and educator capacity through coaching, modelling and pedagogical mentoring. Rather than a one-off intervention, the program embeds intentional oral language and literacy practices—grounded in the Science of Reading (SOR)—into everyday play, routines and small group learning (Konza, 2014; Kilpatrick, 2016). This includes strategies to harness and develop phonological awareness, narrative storytelling, vocabulary and oral comprehension in ways that are engaging, responsive and sustainable. Evidence shows significant impact: in 2024, children in Hastings kindergartens improved in story sequencing from 23% to 83%. Educators report increased confidence and strong alignment with primary schools already applying SOR, strengthening equity in transitions. This presentation will share practical strategies, outcomes and lessons on scaling community-driven innovation for lasting literacy equity.

## **Strengthening Early Years Outcomes Through Integrated Regional Collaboration: The Far North Early Childhood Network Model**

*Sarah Wilde, FNECN Chair, Far North Early Childhood Network (FNECN) & Gilyan Thorne, NQ Health Priorities Lead*

The Far North Early Childhood Network (FNECN) exemplifies a regionally embedded model of integrated cross-sector collaboration aimed at improving outcomes for children and families. This presentation will examine the evolution of governance and operational relationships that underpin shared planning, responsive service delivery, and professional learning across the early years landscape. A key initiative—the Child Development Checks, delivered as part of a broader Community Campaign—demonstrates how coordinated efforts can identify developmental needs early and connect families to appropriate supports. This case highlights the power of integrated practice and the importance of community-informed approaches. The session will also showcase how Early Childhood Community Networks contribute regular, grassroots feedback that informs FNECN's strategic planning and priorities, ensuring regional strategies are shaped by local voices and frontline experience. Additional examples from internal and external initiatives will illustrate the principles of collaboration, adaptability, and shared responsibility. Attendees will gain actionable insights into the structures and relationships that enable effective cross-sector integration, with relevance for both regional and state-level planning contexts. \* Please note our abstract does not align to your areas above that required us to highlight by a tick. Would be good to have a system focus area.

## **The Interconnection of Health, Wellbeing, and Early Learning for a Brighter Future**

*Justine Edward, Campus Principal Cairns & Carolyn Grant, Department of Education*

Children who endure prolonged hospitalisation, chronic illness and separation from family and community often miss early education opportunities. These gaps can undermine positive transitions into school and perpetuate vulnerability. Queensland Children's Hospital School (QCHS) deliver education programs, from playgroups, and kindergarten through to primary and secondary programs, through a unique, statewide approach. Educators work alongside schools, health and allied health professionals and partner with organisations such as Act for Kids to support continuity of learning. Over 200 children each year engage with Hospital Kindy whilst receiving treatment at Queensland Children's Hospital and, for many, this is their only formal kindergarten experience. In 2025, QCHS expanded Hospital Kindy pilots into four regional areas: Cairns, Townsville, Logan and the Gold Coast, with the aim of providing access to education for children in all major centres as well as those transitioning from specialised care in Brisbane to and from their local hospital. Many educators are unaware of the important role QCHS plays until they work directly with a hospitalised student. Workshop attendees will gain insights into how innovative education practices and multi-disciplinary collaboration responds to the needs of children, families, caregivers, and communities to optimise health, wellbeing and early learning.

## **Implementing the Brief Coaching Model: A Practice-Based Approach to Early Parenting Support**

*Emma Carmody, Senior Design Specialist & Cathryn Hunter, Practice Design Specialist, Parenting Research Centre*

**Background and rationale:** The Brief Coaching Model (BCM) was developed by the Parenting Research Centre in collaboration with Victorian agencies and funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH). Designed to strengthen practitioner capability in early intervention and family support, the BCM offers structured sessions that build parent confidence, skills, and problem-solving capacity. Flexible and adaptable, it can be used as a stand-alone tool or alongside longer-term supports. **Methods:** The model was co-designed using an evidence-informed, practice-based approach. A literature review and practitioner workshops shaped the model, followed by training and group coaching to support implementation. The pilot involved 51 practitioners from nine agencies. Data was collected through training evaluations and usefulness. **Results and implications:** Most practitioners (75%) found the model easy to use with families and consistently rated it as feasible, acceptable, and appropriate. Qualitative feedback highlighted increased confidence, reflective practice, and wellbeing benefits. Based on these findings, DFFH funded an expanded implementation for 2025–26. **Key message:** Co-designed, evidence-informed approaches like BCM can give families practical support when they need it most. By combining research, practice wisdom, and lived experience, we can create purposeful solutions that work in real-world settings.

## **How can we involve families of children with developmental concerns in co-designing supports while they wait for therapy?**

*Claire Benham, Director & Kym Dunstan, Project Officer, Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service*

Demand for child development services is increasing worldwide, leading to lengthy waiting times that threaten timely access to early intervention and impact children's health and learning outcomes. Additionally, social determinants of health create inequities in access and development. This presentation describes how multidisciplinary clinicians and parents collaborated to address this challenge in one health service. **Methods** A mixed methods design using surveys and focus groups explored the waiting experience from family and staff perspectives and supported the co-design and action to implement strategies. The three-phase process involved parents as research team members to guide each step. **Results** A total of 542 family surveys and 43 responses from multidisciplinary clinicians were received, offering insights into experiences and influencing factors while waiting. Seven key ideas to support families were identified and implementation of these solutions is presented. **Evaluation** Harnessing the perspectives of both families and clinicians and the inclusion of parents as part of the research team has inspired the development of feasible and sustainable solutions to better meet diverse needs of families. **Key messages:** Families require proactive and coordinated support while waiting for services. Co-designing supports with parents leads to more meaningful and sustainable solutions that truly meet families' needs.

## **Inspiring action: Exploring the ECEC-parent relationship and help-seeking behaviours from the 2025 Parenting Today national survey**

*Leigh Wilks, Research Specialist, Parenting Research Centre*

Optimal childhood outcomes are determined by parenting practices and the quality of relationships within the child's mesosystem. This analysis leverages contemporary, national data to snapshot parental practices and experiences across domains of the Common Approach: Material Basics, Loved and Safe, Healthy and Participating, and Learning. Methods: The Parenting Today National Survey is a large-scale, cross-sectional study providing national data from 10,049 Australian parents/carers, including 3,463 parents of young children (0-5 years) in 2025. The 122-item survey assessed domains such as mental health, parenting self-efficacy, cost-of-living, help-seeking and satisfaction with ECEC experiences. Results: We report the sample demographic profile of parents with young children, contextualised by ABS population benchmarks. Snapshot findings include parenting confidence and consistency, child sleep, parental psychological distress, and time, work and financial pressures. Core findings give insight into the parent-ECEC relationship and common sources of parenting information (e.g., online, family, educators). Implications: This comprehensive recent dataset reveals patterns of positive influence across children's mesosystems. Findings profile parents' ECEC satisfaction and help-seeking preferences, which can inspire parent-centric, yet system-acknowledged decision-making. Key message: The 2025 Parenting Today national survey findings provide a map of parent experiences and preferences within the ECEC context.

## **Embedding Family's Voice in the design and delivery of Integrated Child and Family Hubs**

*Anna-Marie Kanaan, Statewide Integrated Care Manager, Integrated Care Services*

Karitane's Integrated Child and Family Hubs are place-based initiatives designed to support children aged 0–5 and their families by responding to the unique strengths and needs of local communities. Central to the success of these hubs is the co-creation of both physical spaces and service delivery models in partnership with families, communities, and service providers. This presentation explores the implementation of families' voice and co-design principles in two Karitane hubs: Wollie Creek Hub and Fairfield Integrated Child and Family Hub. These hubs differ in size, demographics, and service delivery partnerships, necessitating tailored approaches to engagement. We will share the methods used to embed families' perspectives throughout the design and governance processes, including: • Integrating parents into governance structures • Capturing and incorporating the voices of children • Collaborating with CALD communities • Engaging families who have not previously accessed Karitane services The presentation will highlight key learnings and outcomes from these approaches, showcasing how co-design has influenced both the physical environments and the services offered within the hubs. By sharing our journey, we aim to inform other organisations seeking to embed authentic families' voices in early childhood service hub design.

## **Bringing Up Great Kids in the First 1000 Days: Building Resilient Families through Connection and Care**

*Esther Memmott, Clinical Supervisor – Parenting Clinician & Samantha Foster, Early Intervention Clinician Lead, Children’s Health Queensland*

Background and Rationale: BUGK First 1000 Days enhances universal parenting support. Rooted in brain development research (Healthy emotional, physical and mental), it focuses on nurturing relationships (Valued Loved and Safe) and parental wellbeing during critical early years. The group promotes mental health literacy, social connection, and developmental understanding—engaging families who may not access more intensive services and strengthening overall Child Health services. Methods Four trial groups were delivered across three CHQ sites in 2024-2025 engaging 36 families with infants under 12 months. Facilitators used interactive, relationship-focused sessions. Mixed-method evaluation included thematic analysis of parent feedback and quantitative survey data. Results: Parents reported increased confidence, reduced stress, and deeper understanding of child development referencing improved engagement and bonding with their babies Evaluation/Implications for Practice: BUGK First 1000 Days is being implemented as a universal offering within Child Health, bridging early engagement and targeted support services. Key Message: BUGK First 1000 Days empowers parents to build safe, loving relationships and support their child’s emotional and mental wellbeing—laying the foundation for lifelong resilience and health.

## **The Wee Care Program Model: Early Intervention for Today's Children, Tomorrow's Future**

*Kristy Jensen, Program Manager & Paula La Rosa, CEO, Althea Project*

The Wee Care Program Model, delivered by Althea Projects, is an evidence-informed, early intervention and prevention service providing short-term residential care and family support for children aged 0–11 years. Guided by a Theory of Change and aligned with ARACY’s The Nest wellbeing framework, the model prioritises safety, connection, and developmental wellbeing through six interconnected domains—Identity and Culture, Health, Learning, Participation, Material Basics, and Feeling Valued, Loved and Safe. This presentation will explore how the Wee Care Program translates research into practice through trauma-informed, family-centred, and culturally responsive care. It will outline key methodologies including collaborative partnerships with community and government agencies, child-centred needs assessment/approach, and early relational support that prevent family breakdown and reduce entry into the statutory child protection system. Reflecting the theme Today’s Children – Tomorrow’s Future, the model demonstrates how strengthening early attachments, family resilience, and social connectedness in the early years builds the foundation for lifelong wellbeing, learning, and community belonging. The Wee Care Program stands as a replicable, holistic approach that embodies the principles of The Common Approach—ensuring every child has the best possible start in life.

## **Building Resilience Through Relational Practices: Brave Foundation's Model of Mentoring**

*Sue Wilson, Head of Transformation & Catherine Cooney, Head of Program, Brave Foundation*

The stigma associated with parenthood at a young age is recognised as a major barrier to young parents' engagement. Nonjudgemental, relationally focused practice that recognises young parents' strengths and supports their autonomy to make decisions about their family's lives can address this engagement barrier and achieve better outcomes for all. Brave's mentoring approach, embedded within its Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program, offers a transformative model grounded in research. The model highlights the critical role of caring adult–young person relationships in promoting positive developmental outcomes, mentors engage with young parents through relational practices that validate lived experience and empower informed decision-making. These relationships mirror the nurturing dynamics young parents are encouraged to build with their own children. By modelling healthy relational behaviours, mentors become trusted role models who help strengthen the parent-child bond and foster secure attachments. This cultivates resilience in children by reinforcing their sense of safety, belonging, and self-worth. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from SEPT participants and organisational practice, this presentation will explore how Brave's mentoring framework operationalises these principles across individual, programmatic, and organisational levels, demonstrating how intentional relational mentoring can shape resilient families and communities.

# DAY TWO: SESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS

## FRIDAY MORNING

### The myth of the “easy” baby

*Eloise Markey, Early Childhood Teacher, Creche and Kindergarten Association*

What if you met an infant who made no demands of you, she never asks you for help? Or a little boy who sleeps all day? Or a socially savvy baby who is outgoing, in charge and charms every adult she meets. Sounds like a dream, right? Especially in a busy infant room. But what if you knew that these were all indicators of trauma? That baby who never asks for help actually has unattuned parents who never notice her needs. That baby who sleeps all day has a single mother who works nights and can't cope with his needs. He's learned that sleeping is safer and easier. That baby who is so bright and charming has a depressed mother who she needs to up-regulate so that her own needs can be met. This presentation talks about trauma in infants under 12 months, what it looks like, and some strategies educators can use for all infants to help build their relational capacity. Using trauma-aware strategies and incorporating real-life case studies, this presentation is both thought-provoking and practical.

### Communi Play: A Tiered Speech Therapy and Playgroup Model Embedding Foundational Supports in Vulnerable Communities

*Nisrine El Choueifati, Principal Speech Pathologist, Talking Triumphs Speech Pathology*

Background and Rationale Clinic-based early communication supports often miss families in socially vulnerable communities. Communi Play was developed in partnership with Talking Triumphs Speech Therapy Services and the Child, Youth and Family Programs at Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre, NSW. Located in an area of high vulnerability on AEDC domains—particularly emotional maturity and social competence—Communi Play embeds foundational communication supports directly within playgroups. Guided by five cycles of participatory action research, the program reflects ARACY's Common Approach—holistic, strengths-based, child-centred, and collaborative—while responding to the growing demand for foundational supports in the early years. Methods Implemented in neighbourhood playgroups serving highly diverse families, Communi Play applies The Balanced System® model (Gascoigne, 2025) across three tiers: universal language-rich playgroup sessions, embedded and culturally responsive caregiver coaching, and collaborative targeted supports. Student placements were integrated to build workforce capacity. Mixed-method data included observations, surveys, reflective logs, and stakeholder feedback. Results Over 12 months, 80 children and 40 caregivers engaged in Tier 1 sessions. Tier 2 coaching enhanced caregiver confidence in communication strategies, while 10 student placements resulted in a 90% increase in competence in community-based, culturally responsive practice. Implications Communi Play demonstrates that embedding foundational supports in everyday community settings delivers relational, equitable, and sustainable early intervention while inspiring systemic collaboration and preventive action.

## **Enhancing Outcomes Utilising Cross-Sector Partnerships: FASD in North Queensland**

*Caitlin Craner, Speech Pathologist/FASD Clinical Intake Officer, Townsville Hospital and Health Service & Dr Timothy Rossow, Clinical Psychologist, Department of Education (QLD)*

**Background:** Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a highly prevalent disorder (3.64% of Australian population) which is frequently misdiagnosed or undiagnosed. Contributing factors include limited community awareness of FASD and a lack of understanding of how to support children who present with challenges across the neurodevelopmental domains associated with FASD. The aim of the cross-sector collaboration was to enhance the understanding of FASD and referral pathways available, as well as building the capability of educators and health staff working with children with FASD and their families. **Methods:** Educational workshops were delivered to communities across North Queensland by clinicians working in Queensland Health and the Department of Education. Participants included health staff, school staff, private clinicians, and early years educators. Survey feedback was obtained following these workshops. **Results:** 105 attendees across six regional and remote communities participated in the workshops. Results showed increased knowledge of FASD and strategies for support across all communities. Results also highlighted participants' change of practice in the FASD space. **Evaluation & Key message:** Partnering across sectors allows for more comprehensive and collaborative capacity building, strengthening referral pathways, practice changes, and enhancing support for children and families.

## **Connecting early education, health and family support systems through culturally led governance**

*Keith Elaisa, Coordinator & Cat Uta, Project Officer, Connected Beginnings, Wuchopperen Health Services Ltd; Tylisha Wilson, Assistant Director, Dudley Ah Chee, Senior Cultural Family Engagement Officer & Kahlia Miller, Connected Beginnings at Kura Yerlo*

SNAICC's Connected Beginnings initiative is transforming early childhood service delivery across Australia by embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture at the heart of holistic, place-based support. This presentation explores how Connected Beginnings sites (Cairns, Rockhampton and Geraldton) serve as powerful vehicles for strengthening cultural identity, increasing community voice and enabling early years services to engage meaningfully with First Nations families. By connecting early education, health and family support systems through culturally led governance, Connected Beginnings ensures that Elders, cultural leaders and community-controlled organisations guide program design and delivery. This results in services that reflect local language, kinship structures, storytelling traditions and cultural practices—all of which are crucial for children's social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Through initiatives such as cultural playgroups, on Country learning, family yarning spaces, Elders story corners and community led workforce development, sites are building trust, boosting participation and promoting school readiness grounded in cultural pride. The presentation will highlight lessons from Connected Beginnings sites in incorporating culture as the foundation—not an add on—in early years practice. It will offer practical strategies for mainstream services seeking to integrate cultural frameworks authentically, foster strong partnerships with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and create culturally safe environments that nurture belonging, resilience and lifelong learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## Interplay Therapy

*Donna Mahoney, Principal Practitioner & Paula Dickson, Counsellor, Innate Therapies Australia*

Interplay Therapy is a therapeutic approach that integrates elements of play therapy, attachment theory, and mindfulness. Interplay Therapy supports play as it is a natural way of connecting with emotions, in therapy it can help resolve psychological issues, improve communication and repair rupture in relationships. The method encourages a safe, supportive space where clients can engage in activities. Key Concepts of Interplay Therapy: 1. Attachment-Focused: Interplay builds on attachment theory, focusing on strengthening emotional bonds and improving communication within relationships (especially between children and their caregivers). 2. Play as Healing: Through play, individuals can express emotions and experiences that may be too difficult to articulate with words. Play allows for a non-verbal form of communication. 3. Mindfulness and Presence: Mindfulness and being present in the moment, helping the client to process emotions in real-time rather than avoiding them. 4. Non-Directive Approach: The therapy is often non-directive, meaning the therapist doesn't dictate what the client should do but provides a safe, open space for the client to express themselves. 5. Integration of Creative Modalities: Activities like drawing, movement, role-playing, and imaginative play help access deeper layers of the subconscious mind, which might be harder to reach with traditional talk therapy.

## Supporting children experiencing significant adversity and complex trauma using a multidisciplinary approach

*Sarah Jackson, Early Childhood Teacher, C & K Dixon Street*

C&K Dixon Street Early Years Centre is partnering with Parkville Institute to implement and evaluate the replication of the Early Years Education Program (EYEP)\*, an intensive, high-quality early childhood education and care model that achieved remarkable learning and developmental outcomes for children in the original trial. The program aims to change the life trajectory of children by enhancing learning and developmental outcomes through relational pedagogy informed by early education, infant mental health, and trauma research. At C&K Dixon Street Early Years Centre, multidisciplinary theories underpin a program designed supporting children's holistic development, learning, and wellbeing. This presentation shares a case study illustrating one child's journey through our centre, demonstrating how early education and infant mental health research have informed our planning for the growth and development of a child with complex trauma. Our approach embodies a deep respect for children's rights and dignity as individuals experiencing significant trauma and stress impacting their development, learning and wellbeing. EYEP was initiated by Kids First, formerly the Children's Protection Society (CPS), an independent not-for-profit child and family services organization based in north-east Melbourne, founded in 1896. The program was designed and implemented by CPS in collaboration with Associate Professor Brigid Jordan and Dr Anne Kennedy.

## **Supporting Young Families: The Benevolent Society’s Holistic Maternal and Child Health Hub in Logan**

*Candel Nadruku, Client Liaison Officer, The Benevolent Society*

The Maternal and Child Health Hubs across Logan provide consistent, holistic care for expectant and new parents. The Benevolent Society’s Hub specifically focuses on supporting young parents—those under 21 for their first child, and under 25 for subsequent children—through a collaborative, wraparound model of care. This model brings together midwives, client liaison officers, social workers from Logan Hospital, and Child and Family Practitioners to ensure that the diverse needs of young parents are met with compassion, professionalism, and cultural sensitivity. Many of these young people come from varied cultural, social, economic, and religious backgrounds, and are often adolescents navigating the dual challenges of youth and early parenthood. The Hub’s integrated approach bridges this gap by offering tailored support that acknowledges both their developmental stage and parenting responsibilities. It also plays a critical role in mediating within families, helping young parents navigate evolving relationships and roles within their families of origin while building their own family units. Through this work, the Hub strengthens family resilience, promotes positive parenting, and contributes to improved outcomes for both parents and children—making it a vital partner in the broader maternal and child health ecosystem across Logan.

## **Connected Early Support for Parents and Families**

*Louise Cunningham, Senior Manager, Child, Youth and Families & Natalie Worthington, Manager, Child & Family Services & Angela Hoy, Team Leader, Family Wellbeing Program, Uniting Vic Tas*

Evidence indicates that a universal approach to service delivery for families reduces stigma, encourages help seeking and ensures services are available to everyone, ultimately resulting in reduced child abuse. Uniting and VACCA’s Early Help Program (EHP) aims to achieve this by co-locating evidence-based support in universal services where families are already engaged. EHP is located within schools, early childhood services and health services. Over the past 3 years, the program has provided evidence-based group work and short-term interventions for nearly 1000 families, seeing our program successfully connect universal services with specialist family services. The program demonstrates that time-limited, low cost, connected support can meaningfully strengthen parents’ capacity to provide safe environments for children as well as support parent empowerment and confidence. Our presentation will focus on the development and implementation of the program, including data displaying the outcomes. We will also discuss case-studies to bring the work to life. We are excited to share that data (pre and post intervention surveys) indicates a 30 – 42 percent increase in parents’ confidence, emotional regulation and overall parenting skills following our intervention. Qualitative data and consumer feedback will also be presented, displaying heart-warming reflections from consumers.

## **Developing place-based early learning initiatives for our communities: Insights from an Aboriginal-led organisation**

*Liz Parriman, Building Baby Brains Facilitator & Debra Hannagan, Early Years Learning and Literacy Coordinator, Waardi Ltd*

Place-based approaches are characterised by collaboration and a long-term commitment to building thriving communities (Dart, 2019). In the early years, this requires meaningful partnerships between families and service providers, recognizing the value of both quality early learning and strong family and cultural connections. Waardi Limited, an Aboriginal-led organisation in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, works to strengthen communities through building the capacity of families and early years services. In this presentation, we share our work on the Building Babies Brains and Literacy Acquisition for Pre-primary Students initiatives and our reflections on working in partnership with communities. Reference: Dart, J. (2019). Place-based evaluation framework: a guide for evaluation of place-based approaches in Australia.

## **From Vision to Action: Queensland Health's Model for Child and Family Health Wellbeing and Development**

*Diane Cruice, Principal Project Officer, Queensland Health*

The early years are a powerful window to shape lifelong health, wellbeing, and development. A review of Queensland Health services providing child and family health, wellbeing and developmental care identified fragmented services, variable access, and inconsistent pathways. These findings inspired the vision for a cohesive, equitable model of service delivery. The model was developed through an iterative and collaborative process. Initial scoping and consultation identified service gaps and inequities. A draft was co-designed with the Centre for Community Child Health, Melbourne, then refined through statewide workshops, clinical leadership group, and wider stakeholder feedback. The resulting model establishes a part structure (Universal, Universal Plus, Enhanced) grounded in proportionate universalism and underpinned by guiding principles of care. It outlines how services can be translated into practice through a holistic understanding of each child and family, community priorities, and the local service landscape, fostering stronger coordination, collaboration, and connections among providers. This journey shows how data, inspiration, and collaboration can drive action. The model offers a unifying framework to improve child health, wellbeing, and developmental outcomes, giving every child the chance to thrive.

## **The Early Years Safety Threads Program: Embedding Protective Behaviours Education in Early Childhood**

*Nathan Gallagher, Training & Development Lead - Child Protection, Act for Kids*

The Early Years Safety Threads Program has been developed as the early childhood extension of Act for Kids' Learn to Be Safe with Emmy and Friends program for children aged 0–10. The broader Learn to Be Safe program is underpinned by more than a decade of research and large-scale evaluations demonstrating improvements in children's safety knowledge, confidence to seek help, and protective

behaviours. Grounded in trauma-informed and play-based approaches, the program equips educators with practical strategies to confidently embed protective behaviours into everyday interactions and routines. It also provides families with accessible resources that extend safety conversations into the home, supporting children to recognise unsafe situations, express feelings, and seek help from trusted adults. Aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework, National Quality Framework, and ARACY's Common Approach domains of Learning, Loved and Safe, Healthy, and Participating, the program promotes consistent, developmentally appropriate protective behaviours education. The resources can also be used within family support and therapeutic settings and applied across sibling groups to reinforce learning. This presentation will outline the program's design, implementation, and early educator feedback, highlighting how early years professionals can strengthen children's wellbeing, safety, and voice through everyday practice.

## **Mapping the First 2000 Days: Building Shared Insight for Systems Change in Cairns South**

*Thomas Wintzloff, Program Manager, Mission Australia*

Cairns South Together, in collaboration with Woven Futures, is undertaking a systems mapping project to surface how children and families experience the local service system from pregnancy through age five. This work responds to a clear need for shared, actionable insight into how the system holds, or fails to hold, families across foundational transitions. Drawing on community voice, practitioner insight, and public data, the map will reveal pathways, barriers, duplication, and fragmentation across universal and targeted services. More than a visual product, the system map is a capacity-building tool designed to strengthen local capability in systems thinking and coordinated action. It will support cross-sector planning and guide investment toward root causes. We will share interim learnings including reflections on method, early insights, and opportunities for peer learning. This project is awaiting funding confirmation and is contingent on funding to move ahead (to be confirmed in late November). The project aligns strongly with ARACY's six wellbeing domains in its approach. This presentation will explore how systems-focused tools can deepen place-based efforts and contribute to shared measurement and action in place.

## **Connecting2u: Empowering Queensland Parents through Connection, Culture and Collaboration**

*Alanna Philipson, Principal Program Officer & Anna Kinnane, Senior Project Officer, Children's Health Queensland*

The first 2000 days shape lifelong outcomes, yet many Queensland parents face barriers to timely, culturally safe support. Connecting2u (C2u) is a free, evidence-informed mobile health (mHealth) program delivering SMS messages from the baby's perspective to strengthen parental health literacy, confidence, and connection. Under Putting Queensland Kids First, C2u is scaled statewide to advance early intervention, equity, and system-wide value. Methods C2u offers tailored SMS streams for mothers, fathers, and carers, with co-designed content for First Nations families and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. A mixed-methods evaluation of the statewide expansion will assess program engagement, value and user experience across priority populations. The digital platform is being

enhanced for scalable delivery - positioning C2u as an asset in preventative care. Results Over 21,000 families are currently supported. Antenatal messaging from six weeks gestation covers care models, nutrition, emotional wellbeing, bonding, and self-care. Previous evaluations show increased parental confidence, improved health literacy, and stronger service connections. Implications for Practice This presentation shares insights from antenatal content development, CALD co-design, and digital expansion. C2u complements existing services and informs future scale through deeper integration and continued innovation. Key Message C2u delivers inclusive, timely support from pregnancy through early childhood - building trust, equity, and connection from the start.

## **Prevention In Action - Collaborating with Children, families and communities to shift conversations into action**

*Sarnia Ralston, Qld Manager, NAPCAN & Michelle Cole, Principal Partnership Manager – Capability Development, Queensland Kids Partnership.*

Inspiring prevention requires more than awareness; it calls for action, collaboration, and shared responsibility. This presentation explores how NAPCAN is working alongside Queensland Kids Partnership (QKP) and the Queensland early childhood sector to transform conversations about child safety by reframing how adults understand and respond to children's experiences of feeling and being safe. By listening deeply to children, adults can take meaningful, everyday action to strengthen protective environments for all. The session highlights how collaboration between children, educators, families, and communities can embed the Queensland Child Safe Standards in practical, relational, and inclusive ways. Drawing on insights from NAPCAN's work supporting educators to connect policy to practice, and the QKP resilience scale resource, participants will explore how prevention in action empowers adults to engage children and families in conversations about safety, amplify children's voices, and build community confidence in child safeguarding systems. Demonstrating co-designed approaches, tools, and resources, the presentation will showcase how educators apply protective behaviours and resilience frameworks to strengthen child safe cultures across diverse contexts; including cultural responses developed through partnerships with remote Queensland and Northern Territory communities. Together, we will reflect on how collective, inspired action turns every conversation into prevention in practice.

## **Impactful collaboration through a co-developed early childhood education and care (ECEC) model**

*Miranda Edwards, EYS WA Director, SNAICC & Tara Leslie, CEO, Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child & Family Centre Nowra*

Boori Milumba is a co-developed intensive ECEC model supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (birth to three years) living with significant adversity, to bridge the gap to school readiness. Co-development partners are Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child and Family Centre (Cullunghutti), Nowra, NSW, SNAICC — National Voice for our Children, Parkville Institute and Social Ventures Australia. This collaboration led to inclusions of a multidisciplinary team, Cultural Framework, overseen by a Cultural Lead and weekly on Country sessions. Up to 36 children will participate in the three-year trial at Cullunghutti. The main research aim is to measure how children's participation in the model enhances

their well-being and development through high quality, Aboriginal led ECEC. There is a strong focus on connection to culture and Country, to ensure children start school with a strong cultural foundation and are developmentally on track. Targeted early years support and rigorous evaluation of the outcomes for participating children, by the University of Melbourne, can fill in evidence gaps to inform policy, funding and program design. It can also deliver a positive narrative on transformative changes in the life trajectories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## **FRIDAY AFTERNOON**

### **From Behaviour to Meaning: Understanding What Children Are Communicating**

*Kelly Oldfield, Founder & Behaviour Specialist, Child Behaviour Development*

**Background and rationale:** Challenging behaviour in early learning settings is often a child's way of communicating needs, interactions, stressors, or emotions. When educators shift from reacting to behaviour to understanding its function, children learn positive ways to express themselves and experience a stronger sense of belonging. This presentation explores how strengthening educators' understanding of behaviour as communication improves regulation, connection, and team confidence. **By embedding responsive, relationship-based strategies, services can move beyond behaviour management toward proactive, evidence-informed practice.** **Methods:** Educators will gain practical strategies to apply within their services, focusing on shifting mindset from what the behaviour is to why is this behaviour occurring. Through the lens of functional behaviour principles, they learn to identify cues, triggers, and sensory factors that influence behaviour, apply effective and sustainable strategies, and establish consistent, predictable routines. Which supports confidence, team consistency, and children's engagement and regulation. **Results and implications:** Educators create calmer environments, build stronger relationships, and respond less reactively. Viewing behaviour as communication shifts the focus from actions to meaning, leading to fewer behavioural incidents, greater emotional safety, and more inclusive practice — supporting both educator wellbeing and positive child development.

### **Building the foundations of Equity -shifting the dial from children's participation to co-determination in place-based movements of collective action**

*Geraldine Harris, Executive Director, Pathways to Resilience Trust & Dan Smith, Manager, Communities for Children Capricorn*

“Everything a child does, every expression, every movement, every heartbeat, every behaviour and every sound they make, tell a story of their experience of safety, their relational history and the environment in which they love learn play and develop”. (Wings to Fly 2.0, 2025) The Children's Voice Project was undertaken by Pathways to Resilience for The Smith Family. The project was designed to bring children more fully into the collective action and place- making processes. The project founded on the core concept of 'Childship' (Harris, 2022) which positions children, along with adults, as the collective stewards of the childhood commons (Harris, 2024). The childhood commons© is made up of the inner, relational and ecological environments in which children love, learn, play and develop. The collective process was theoretically underpinned by U-Theory to make visible the process of engaging children into

the place-making process. The 5 staged process weaves together intention (co-initiating), gathering data (co-sensing), co-presencing (co-creating real-time meaning with children), story-sensing (co-creating), exploring recommendations and next steps (co-evolving). Using ethical frameworks to safeguard children, Theory-U holds the space for co-determination in collective action, whereby children and adults could navigate together, as place-makers co-creating futures, with and within the childhood commons.

## **Knowledge and Confidence of Child Health Nurses to support Preventive Health**

*Brigitte Corcoran, Senior Health Practitioner, Health and Wellbeing Queensland*

Evidence-based health support in early childhood is crucial for lifelong wellbeing. In Queensland, Child and Family Health Workforce (C&FHW) clinicians provide care for children from birth to five years. As part of the Putting Queensland Kids First Strategy, efforts are underway to strengthen the C&FHW—particularly Child Health Nurses—by enhancing their capacity to deliver evidence-based care. Research highlights the need for professional development among early career Child Health Nurses to build confidence and skills in addressing early risk factors such as overweight and obesity. Workforce scoping has also revealed gaps in staff knowledge in preventive health areas, including breastfeeding. To address these gaps, Health & Wellbeing Queensland secured funding to develop a digital, prevention-focused training package for the C&FHW. A statewide survey of 150 nurses and Aboriginal and Islander health workers across 16 Hospital and Health Service Districts identified priority training areas, including early nutrition, growth monitoring, and culturally safe practices. This presentation will share findings from the training needs analysis and the collaborative processes that informed the training package's development. By addressing these gaps, the initiative aims to improve the quality and consistency of care, supporting better health outcomes for Queensland children and families.

## **The Tracking Cube Across Sectors: Community-Led Weaving of Developmental Support**

*Sarah Horton, Project Manager, Changing Health Systems Research Group. Amy O'Grady & Christy Armstrong, Benevolent Society Gold Coast. Danni Smith, Silver Lining Foundation, Neuroability Support, Townsville. Dr Erinn Hawkins, Griffith University. Kerri O'Connor and Theresa McDonald, North West Hospital and Health Service.*

Supporting children's development in the early years requires systems that enable services to work together, across sectors and regions. The Tracking Cube is a culturally responsive system for monitoring child neurodevelopmental care. Born on Kalkadoon Country (Mt Isa), the Tracking Cube is grounded in local First Nation art and storytelling. It supports early identification, shared decision-making, and coordinated care of developmentally vulnerable children across health, education, and social services. This presentation highlights how a common framework, such as the Tracking Cube, can foster collaboration across diverse service systems. Using case studies from three Queensland regions, Gold Coast, Northwest, and Townsville, we showcase examples of how the Tracking Cube has been implemented with partners in early learning, health, and community services. Together, these case stories demonstrate new ways of working: sharing insights, coordinating collaborative action, and extending care beyond traditional age or service boundaries. Methods include journey mapping with families and providers, alongside narrative examples of capturing service experiences.

Initial learnings highlight that Tracking Cube supports a shared language across sectors, helps identify gaps and overlaps in care, and strengthens cross-regional collaboration. We will discuss implications for scaling this model to inspire collective action, ensuring children receive the right support at the right time."

## **It's never too early: Exploring Australian parents' and carers' experiences with child sexual abuse prevention**

*Abbey Doran & Hayley Natoli (Presenter), Project Support Workers, Project Paradigm IFYS*

Despite the efficacy of parent-led preventative approaches to reduce occurrences of child sexual abuse (CSA), there are limited practical resources that support parents/carers to actively engage in meaningful CSA prevention efforts (Rudolph et al., 2022). The aim of this qualitative study was to explore parental experiences of navigating CSA prevention, for the purpose of informing practical resources that support parents/carers. Three, two-hour focus group sessions were conducted across the Baringa and Caloundra community centres over one week among parents/carers of children aged under 5. Self-constructed surveys investigated parents' various conversations and experiences around CSA prevention (e.g., nappy changing, online safety). Thirty parents attended the focus groups, with 18 survey respondents (52.94% aged 30 to 40, diverse ethnicities). Thematic analysis revealed inconsistency in parent/carer understandings of child sexual abuse, the indicators, how to respond to disclosures and report, and uncertainty around how to engage in preventative conversations. This research bridges a critical gap by informing practical tools that educate parents/carers and drive collective community CSA prevention efforts, such as Project Paradigm's 'It's never too early' resource. Involving parents/carers within prevention is integral to build communities where children are safe, mentally and physically healthy, and feel heard, supported, loved, and secure.

**END OF ABSTRACTS**

## Thank you to all presenters at the Early Years Conference

