

{Embrace}

Summer 2019 | Your inclusion support magazine

No funding? No problem

How to include a child
with high support needs
without accessing funding



Acknowledgement and
Welcome to Country 101

FREE

welcome
poster for your
service inside

VICTORIAN
INCLUSION
AGENCY

One For All



What if there's something you haven't learnt yet that could change everything?

It's a question we're asking as we launch this edition of *Embrace*, which is all about how shifting your mindset can help you achieve the 'impossible'. This edition has been a long time in the making and we hope it resonates as deeply with you as it does with us.

Inside these pages you'll find strength, optimism, and, as always, stories and ideas from leading early and middle years education services. We hear how making diversity visible can create culturally safe and inclusive settings, reveal how to include a child with high support needs without accessing funding + share how borrowing free equipment can help you support children with additional needs. We also gift you a FREE poster to help set a tone of inclusion and community at your service.

This issue, we're encouraging educators and leaders to think about the ways that mindset plays out in our work with children and families. What are your biggest limiting beliefs? What else is possible? What can you do now that your future self would thank you for?

We welcome your stories and experiences. Email us at via@cccinc.org.au or join the conversation on Facebook [@CommunityChildCareAssoc](https://www.facebook.com/CommunityChildCareAssoc)

Jane McCahon
VIA Program Manager
Community Child Care Association

The Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. As part of the ISP, the Victorian Inclusion Agency is led by Community Child Care Association, and is delivered in partnership with Yooralla and KU Children's Services.

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The Victorian Inclusion Agency acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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What you told us

A big thanks to the hundreds of education and care services that shared their thoughts with us in a recent email survey – here are a few highlights...

71% of services have requested support from the Victorian Inclusion Agency

79% of services have Strategic Inclusion Plans or have started the process

83% of services say Inclusion Professionals are effective in helping to remove inclusion barriers

68% of services want to learn more about Innovative Solutions funding



How have we helped?

"[Our Inclusion Professional has] worked effectively and closely with us to help with inclusion supports for a child with a very rare set of disabilities. This helped the child have a positive and inclusive experience at our service"

"[My Inclusion Professional] set up a new network so that I could attend meetings. This has been brilliant as I have been [working in] a single educator model for several years. It has meant that I have met people from other services and...feel comfortable attending expos and conferences"

"[Our Inclusion Professional] is very supportive of everyone in the service and will invest time to ensure that each child is supported and each educator is equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide ongoing support to the children"

"I had staff attend the Inclusion Expo – and thought it was fantastic"

"Our service includes many children with autism spectrum disorder... [Our Inclusion Professional] gives valuable strategies we can use and pass on to educators. We have been amazed at the progress of our enrolled children that fall within this category, particularly with regard to self-regulating"



"We highly value the support we have received – as a result, inclusive practices are embedded in our programs and the children are thriving at our service"





Acknowledgement and Welcome to Country 101



Images courtesy of Fifth Avenue Child Care and Kindergarten Service

What is Country?

Before colonisation, Australia was not one country, but approximately 200+ countries and nations. You can think of pre-colonial Australia as being similar to Europe, in the sense that each Country was vastly different to its neighbours. Every Country had its language, lore, traditions, customs, stories, songlines, art, dance, ecosystems and more.

For Aboriginal people, the meaning of Country goes beyond the dictionary definition of the word. It's more than just boundaries outlining an area of land because the meaning of Country is more than ownership of or connection to land. As Professor Mick Dodson explains:

"When we talk about traditional 'Country'...we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians... we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on the map.

For us, Country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. While they may all no longer necessarily be the titleholders to land, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are still connected to the Country of their ancestors and most consider themselves the custodians or caretakers of their land."





Why is it important to acknowledge Country and be welcomed on Country?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced significant exclusion from Australian society for many years. Also, many non-Indigenous Australians have not had the opportunity to learn about, and celebrate, the rich cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This contributes to a rift between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians that persists today.

Acknowledging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples during events is one part of ending this exclusion. It recognises the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first custodians of this land and, importantly, promotes awareness of the history and culture of Indigenous peoples. This increased awareness will help us create a more united Australia that celebrates and embraces our First Nations peoples.



What do I need to know to have a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country?

Welcome to Country

An official Welcome to Country can only be provided by a member of the Traditional Owner group from the Country where the event is taking place. Welcome to Country is performed on ceremonial and other significant occasions to follow traditional protocols and show appropriate respect.

While it is customary for an Elder from the Traditional Owner group to officiate the Welcome to Country, it may be appropriate for another member of the Traditional Owner group – for example, a student at a school event – to convene a Welcome to Country. The right to welcome people on one's land is an inviolable right.

Welcome to Country is a fundamental and traditional practice and should be included in all formal occasions to honour our First Nations peoples, and demonstrate genuine respect for Koorie culture and traditional practices.

Acknowledgement of Country

An Acknowledgement of Country can be less formal and be given by any member of the community – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – who wishes to pay their respects to the Traditional Owners of the land on which the event or meeting is taking place. The Acknowledgement of Country does not need to be an elaborate ceremony, simply a few words.

An example of an Acknowledgement of Country

"I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners and custodians of this land, the [insert local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island nation]. I would like to pay respect to their Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are here today."

It is important to try to find out the name of the Aboriginal nation you wish to acknowledge. You can refer to an Aboriginal languages map or get in contact with your local Aboriginal organisation/co-operative.

How can I incorporate a Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement of Country in my service?

You could have a formal Welcome to Country at the opening of your centre, your graduation, or at an important event, like the opening of a new bush tucker garden. You could invite a local Traditional Owner to come and give a Welcome and do a smoking ceremony.

In more everyday situations, you could also adapt the language of an Acknowledgement of Country to make it something understandable and relatable for the children. For example, during circle time, the children could acknowledge, say hello to or thank (for example) the Wurundjeri people, the land, the sky, their teachers, their friends and themselves. This is a great tool to not only teach gratitude and mindfulness but also incorporate and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and perspectives into your service.

An example of a children's Acknowledgement of Country

We at [insert service name]

Would like to say thank you

To the [insert local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people and nation]

For letting us share your land

We promise to look after it

The animals and the people too

Hello land (all touch the land)

Hello sky (all reach for the sky)

Hello me (hug self)

Hello friends (open arms out wide)



Sometimes a Welcome to Country includes a smoking ceremony



Watch an Acknowledgement of Country in action, and learn how real-life services embed Aboriginal perspectives in their program at www.vimeo.com/viac > **Meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives**



No funding? No problem

A child breaks their neck, but the service isn't eligible for Inclusion Development Funding. We speak to early childhood/kindergarten teacher Vicky Smith from Fox Kids Early Learning Centre about what happened next





You recently approached the Victorian Inclusion Agency for support including a child with a broken neck – can you tell us about this?

Last year, Grace – one of the children in our kinder class – unfortunately broke her neck whilst playing at the park. Our initial concern was her health. We wanted to support the family in any way we could whilst she was in hospital. Once her injuries were assessed, Grace had to be fitted with a halo head brace to wear for three months to support her recovery.

When Grace was given the all-clear to return home, we sought support from the Victorian Inclusion Agency to assist us with her safe and smooth return to the centre.

Grace is a very active child who enjoys being outside – favouring lots of physical activities, ball games and playing with water and sand – so it was going to be difficult for her to adapt to being restricted from participating because of the halo. We wanted as much guidance as we could from our Inclusion Professional. There were many meetings, observation visits and emails back and forth to support all educators at the centre to better understand the situation and seek practical assistance.

Your service wasn't eligible for Inclusion Development Funding. How did this influence your approach?

At first, we were shocked! However, the decision had been made so we had no choice but to take it in our stride and concentrate on the best way to support Grace, her family and her recovery. Our centre director and I went to visit Grace at her home once she had left the hospital, which played a major part in how we moved forward with our approach. We were able to observe Grace where she felt most safe and relaxed, and discuss what had happened with her family in an informal and comfortable manner.

Before Grace's return, we explained her accident and injuries to the children in the kindergarten room in language appropriate to their age and showed them photos of Grace wearing her halo. This was to minimise any initial shock the children may have felt on seeing Grace wearing her halo and to shield Grace from any adverse reactions. We were also able to answer questions that the children inevitably had about what had happened with thought and care.

In planning for Grace's return, we had various meetings with her family, our operations manager and our Inclusion Professional. During these meetings, we discussed barriers and strategies and set out guidelines we thought would best support Grace's return to the kindergarten room and her recovery.

Barriers

**Limited mobility –
risk of falling/being
knocked over**

- ✓ Establish quiet areas
- ✓ Promote smaller group experiences
- ✓ Ensure there is space between experiences

**Transition between
experiences**

- ✓ Review routines and room layouts
- ✓ Assess ways to ease transitions
- ✓ Monitor and remove any hazards
- ✓ Allow for flexibility with transitions

Difficulty feeding

- ✓ Provide choice of utensils
- ✓ Use water bottles with straws
- ✓ Cover halo vest when eating
- ✓ Educators to assist and respond to any needs or difficulties

**Transition to/
from the service**

- ✓ Have familiar educators and extra support in the room for Grace's arrival
- ✓ Family member to stay on site to support Grace if needed
- ✓ Shorter hours of attendance

How did you use your Strategic Inclusion Plan to overcome fear and work through barriers, strategies and actions?

With the support of our Inclusion Professional, including observations and meetings, we identified the main barriers and strategies that we were facing and discussed the best ways to overcome them. One of our biggest barriers – and perhaps our biggest concern – was when Grace would be in our outdoor area. As three rooms share our outdoor area, there are often many children ranging from 18 months to five years old outside. The physical set-up of the environment was a concern as well. Due to her restrictions in movement, Grace was limited to what she could do physically. One barrier was that she was unable to go in the sandpit as the sand could get stuck in parts of the brace. We addressed all of the barriers and, with ongoing discussions with the family, worked out the best strategies and actions to enable a successful transition.

When Grace first returned, she stayed for shorter periods (such as a morning or an afternoon) and had a family member with her for support and comfort. As we developed different strategies and actions and reflected on their success, we were able to increase the time she spent at the centre and her confidence in staying without a family member present.



Following her accident, Grace was required to wear a halo head brace for three months to support her recovery

Continued on next page



Actions

- ✓ Move some inside experiences outdoors + have consistent rules and clear instructions for children when outside i.e. no ball games at times
- ✓ Limit the number of children outside and within the room to reduce the chance of accidents or injury + offer experiences of interest both inside and outside
- ✓ Review the best time to be outside i.e. quieter times when other rooms are sleeping/resting
- ✓ Team meeting to increase staff awareness + all staff to be flexible with routines and communicate with each other
- ✓ Add educator into the room to assist with needs and decrease risks + ensure consistency of educators in the room and good communication during the day

How did this support Grace's recovery?

Our Strategic Inclusion Plan enabled us to reflect on our current practices and environment, looking at the best way to be inclusive not only for Grace but the other children in the centre too. We wanted to prevent further accidents, so it was essential that the barriers identified were addressed and the relevant strategies were put into place. We made changes such as moving tables outside, tailoring group experiences to meet Grace's needs, or moving some of her favourite experiences to places that were easily accessible to her. This meant she was rarely unable to participate in experiences on offer, which would have aided with her feeling of being socially included and minimised the emotional impact of her injury.

...the way each and every child coped with the changes and how supportive they all were will forever amaze me.

Were there any other positive outcomes?

One of the most positive outcomes – aside from Grace's recovery, of course – was the way that the other children in the class handled the injury and processes we had in place to support Grace. Sometimes children underestimate how well they can deal with difficult situations, but the way each and every child coped with the changes and how supportive they all were will forever amaze me. They worked together to make sure chairs were tucked in, resources were off the floor and went out of their way to play games that Grace could join in. To be involved with the group and witness their care, empathy and kindness firsthand is one of my proudest moments as a teacher.

Another positive outcome was the strong relationship we established with Grace's family. As daunting as it was for us, the impact of the accident on them was life-changing and they went through many months of fear and worry over how well her recovery would go. Grace's mum recently sent us this lovely letter:

“When Grace broke her neck we were so overwhelmed and did not know how we were going to get her back to any of her normal activities independently, with a very big, restrictive (and confronting) halo head brace. We were particularly worried about her safety as she could not look down or sideways when she walked or moved around – having already had several falls at home.

Grace had become very anxious and we were also worried about how the children would react to the halo and we were concerned that she might feel stigmatised. As you can imagine it was a very difficult time, but thanks to the support we received from Vicky and the educators, and all Grace's friends at Fox Kids, Grace was able to return and participate safely in many of the activities and interact with all her friends in a safe and supportive environment. This made the world of difference to her recovery.”



What are some of the lessons you've learned? What advice would you give to other services looking to include a child with high support needs without accessing funding?

One of the main lessons I learned was the importance of open and honest communication. From the very beginning, we had regular meetings with the family to discuss the best way to move forward.

I would also recommend that educators in similar situations utilise the support that is available from Inclusion Professionals. Despite not being eligible for funding, we were able to seek support through regular meetings and address barriers that we needed to overcome.

The last piece of advice I would give is to take each day as it comes, particularly in the beginning!

Every day something new would pop up that hadn't been thought of or didn't go the way we expected. Approaching each day on its own meant we could reflect on existing strategies that worked but also be open to adapt or amend them based on what was happening in the moment.

You recently shared your story at the Victorian Inclusion Expos, which were attended by hundreds of educators. What was that experience like?

It was such an honour to be asked to share our story and, although I was very nervous about speaking in front of such a large group, it felt amazing to be able to reflect on the journey we took in supporting Grace to a full recovery. It is a unique story, so we did have a lot of interest from other educators who were curious about the different strategies we used to achieve a positive outcome.

What's next for your service?

Thankfully Grace has made a full recovery and is back to her usual bubbly and active self. Fox Kids will continue to work with the Victorian Inclusion Agency in supporting some of the children we have with additional needs, ensuring we reflect on potential barriers and put strategies in place to provide inclusive environments that support all children's learning and development. As we move forward, we will be able to reflect on the strategies we previously used and consider what worked successfully.



***Everyone
belongs
here***

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More than skin deep

Merri Creek OSHC Coordinator Ben Mason reveals how his service is learning to approach diversity differently

Tell us a little about your service...

We are an outside school hours care (OSHC) service that is run by the school council. We have around 130 children in our care each afternoon. Our service is lucky to have a strong relationship with the school community, including the teaching staff. We pride ourselves on these relationships and the seamlessness of our service within the school.

Your service has changed its attitude to diversity over the last couple of years. Can you tell us about that?

We always thought we had strong and inclusive relationships with families at our service, but we had no tangible proof.

We never saw our school as very multicultural. We're a primary school in the inner north of Melbourne with a high socio-economic community. Most people would see us as a reasonably homogenous community.

Once we started reflecting on our community, we realised that there is quite a bit of diversity in our school that is more than skin deep. Culture is more than the colour of our skin, and more than the countries our ancestors came from. Culture is each family's way of life, and it's completely different from family to family.

We wanted to raise awareness to children, educators and the school community that there is more culture in this school than is visible. We wanted to strengthen relationships with our school community and include families' voices and perspectives in our program.

What practical programs did you put in place to make that change?

We developed a club called Passport Club which invites families with different backgrounds to come in and share their cultures with us and the children. Families bring in cooking activities, teach the children dances, make Loch Ness Monsters and all kinds of fun things for the children to participate in and learn from. We noticed the children of those families would be proud to have their family share their stories and traditions. The other children would be eager to share their backgrounds with the group as well.

What support and resources did you draw on to develop Passport Club?

The school community is the best resource we have access to. There is always such diversity within any school, and being able to have those conversations with families and discover things that we can celebrate and share is such a rich experience for the children.

How has the club made a difference in the lives of children and families?

We've found that families have been more connected with the service and have been keen to come and share their ideas and information with us. Each year we have a different educator run the club, which fosters the relationships between our staff and families.

Your OSHC is integrated with the school – how have you fostered partnerships with the school community and how do these benefit children, educators and classroom teachers?

We put a lot of effort and time into having conversations with families and teachers about the children. We make the time to celebrate successes and discuss challenges.



We are also present at community events, such as trivia nights and school fetes, and we organise events of our own, like film nights and family BBQs. Putting in some effort and being present automatically makes you part of the school community. It can only benefit the children's development when everyone is involved and working together.

What advice would you give to services looking to follow your lead?

Look beyond the surface of the families in your service.

Talk with families about themselves and their backgrounds. Invite families to share their stories with you and the children. The best way to support all children is to have strong relationships with their families and work together for the best possible outcomes for the children.

You recently presented at the Victorian Inclusion Expos, which were attended by hundreds of educators. What was that experience like?

It's always a great experience to share our successes with other services. We had a lot of people approach us after our presentation, wanting more information so that they could run their own Passport Club. It's inspiring to hear that what we do is inspiring others as well.

What's next for Merri Creek OSHC?

We are looking at developing other programs that can help children that need support with friendship issues. We're always looking at ways that we can improve our practice to address any barriers that arise for the children at our service. With every new cohort comes a set of new barriers, so we're constantly looking for new approaches. This is exciting work and so important for everyone.





We rise by lifting others

Did you know you can borrow free equipment to support children with additional needs? Gowrie Victoria Broadmeadows Valley explains how this is making a world of difference to their children and families





Tell us a little about your service...

Gowrie Victoria Broadmeadows Valley offers both long day care and sessional kindergarten. Our six multi-age classrooms run a full indoor/outdoor program, giving children access to all classrooms at all times of the day!

We are co-located on a Department of Education hub site, sharing our land and learnings with Broadmeadows Valley Primary School, Hume Valley Secondary School, Broadmeadows Special Development School and Collingwood English Language School.

Your service uses the Specialist Equipment Library to support inclusion. How did this all come about?

We first introduced specialist equipment back in 2016 when we received an enrolment enquiry from a family with two daughters, one of whom was a wheelchair user. The family expressed their desire to allow both their children equal access to early education. This idea aligned with our inclusive philosophy and we began researching how we could make it happen. Through our relationship with our Inclusion Professional and the family's therapists, we were able to work out which equipment we could try to support the child and educators.

When we first incorporated a piece of specialist equipment we were a little nervous! We were curious about what adjustments we would have to make to ensure the equipment didn't become a barrier for the child or the other children in the room. We wanted to ensure that the child was able to fully engage with other children and all the experiences that we had to offer. We were also curious because many of the educators hadn't handled equipment before. Through our relationships with experts, we quickly gained confidence using specialist equipment within our environment.

How has accessing specialist equipment made a difference to children and their families?

We have been able to support children and families that otherwise wouldn't be able to engage with an early years education service.

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One family has said that the simple act of enrolling their child has been empowering and a step that they never thought they would be able to take.

Through the inclusion of specialist equipment, we have enabled families to engage in self-care and respite for themselves. Some families have returned to the workforce, connecting to other adults and contributing to the community. Families report that the initial stress of adjusting to placing their child in childcare is far outweighed by the relief it offers to their everyday life.

How has using specialist equipment supported children to feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing?

By having specialist equipment in the classroom, we allow the children who use it to engage in relationships and experiences independently of their parents and guardians and to establish a unique identity outside of the family unit.

Through the use of specialist equipment, we have been able to offer a rich and challenging learning experience for all children. Children are encouraged and supported to take risks with their abilities and to experiment and try new ways of doing and being, supported by educators who have a deep understanding of their abilities and a commitment to support exploration.

The equipment is in the classrooms at all times, even when the children who use it are not. This allows children to become familiar with the equipment within their space and to talk about its importance with educators whenever curiosity arises. It takes away the element of novelty that sometimes is evoked when new things appear. By having equipment in the classrooms at all times we are always ready for the arrival of the children who use it. This articulates to the child and their family that the space belongs to them.

How has your Inclusion Professional supported your journey?

Our Inclusion Professional has been imperative to the success of inclusion. From the moment we first thought about bringing in equipment, our Inclusion Professional has been a consistent source of support and guidance. At times we've needed help navigating the Portal, at other times we've been supported with teaching strategies and classroom guidance. At all times, this support has been offered without judgement and with full understanding.

**Congratulations to Gowrie
Victoria Broadmeadows Valley
on their Excellent rating!**

They are the fourteenth Victorian education and care service to be awarded the Excellent rating, and the second service under the revised National Quality Standard (NQS).



What are some of the lessons you've learned?

One of the biggest lessons we have learnt and that we share with everyone is that the act of including specialist equipment into the classroom is not hard! While it might be a bit daunting in the beginning, the benefits far outweigh the initial apprehensions!

Another lesson is that children are amazing (we might have already known this)! We are often asked if children misuse or disrespect the equipment when it's in the classroom. The simple answer is no. We talk at length with all the children about the importance of each piece, which takes away the mystery and increases the knowledge and learning for all.

What advice would you give to services looking to follow your lead? Do you have any tips?

Our advice would be to get in contact with your Inclusion Professional. With their support, we have been able to explore possibilities and remove barriers for many children and families.

We would advise services to start the conversation about potentially using specialist equipment. Often through open discussion, we have been able to relieve any fears and misconceptions, resulting in great experiences for children and families.

We would also advise services to always place the child and family at the centre of their decision-making process and work through any barriers with their Inclusion Professional.

What's next for your service?

We are planning on sourcing funds to upgrade some of the pathways between our service and the school so that our regular outings to the school are more accessible for mobility equipment.



Did you know your service can borrow a diverse range of equipment from the Victorian Inclusion Agency to support quality inclusion?

Visit www.viac.com.au > VIA > Specialist Equipment Library to learn more



FREE
poster
inside



One For All

We envision a future where all Victorian children can meaningfully and actively participate in an education and care service of their family's choice in their community.

Talk to us today about the ways we can help your service remove barriers and support the inclusion of all children.

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