

## EMERGING FINDINGS REPORT

# Evaluating the Early Help Family Services Trial at Our Place



Prepared for: Department of Families, Fairness and Housing  
Prepared by: Our Place Evaluation Team

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#### Acknowledgement of Country

Our Place welcomes all families and children. We acknowledge the First Nations people of Australia and Traditional Custodians of the lands that we live and work on. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

#### Thank you

This work was led by the Our Place Evaluation Team. We would like to thank the parents who generously shared their time, experience, and insights with us. Their stories of lived experience are valuable, and we trust that their views are adequately represented in this report.

We would also like to thank Our Place Early Help partners and teams, and Our Place site staff who participated in evaluation activities, sharing their professional insights and reflections. Special thanks are extended to Frances Martin for her invaluable contributions as a meticulous reviewer.

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# 1. Executive Summary

In 2022, the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing (DFFH) engaged Our Place to support the delivery of the Early Help Family Services trial (Early Help) at two Our Place sites in the regions of Barwon (Northern Bay) and Inner Gippsland (Morwell). The trial aimed to strengthen child and family support by embedding evidence-based, early intervention activities in universal service settings, taking place between July 2022 and June 2023. It is one of three 'pathways to support' outlined in the Victorian Government's Roadmap for Reform – a three-year strategy for transforming how children and families are supported in Victoria. In addition to supporting implementation, the Department commissioned Our Place to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the trial to understand how Early Help was implemented, its impact on short-term outcomes for children and families and initial impacts for services in Our Place settings. Qualitative methodologies were used to explore Early Help from the perspectives and experiences of those involved. This report outlines the evaluation's findings and presents recommendations, acknowledging that findings may not be universally applicable due to the sample size of two sites.

The evaluation takes a systems-thinking approach, recognising the importance of understanding the interplay between various components of the service system and how it affects outcomes for families.

## Overview of Early Help Family Services

Early Help is an early intervention model of community-based child and family support. It aims to strengthen the capability of universal services and communities to prevent and respond to concerns experienced by children and families. This approach includes individualised support, group-based activities, flexible funding (brokerage) and capacity building, provided by locally based family service providers in universal settings such as schools and early learning centers. In Our Place settings, the model also includes playgroups and the Our Place-designed Baby College program. Early Help represents a new way of working that focuses on family-centered practice, delivered in places that families frequently visit.

## Our Place and Early Help

Our Place is a holistic, place-based approach to supporting the education, health, and development of children and families in communities experiencing disadvantage by utilising the universal platform of a school. Our Place does not directly deliver services but assists in reshaping local services by providing essential resources to drive action, impact, and local innovation so that these services are more accessible to those who need them most. In 2022, the Department engaged Our Place in order to understand the benefits of implementing the Early Help model in settings with additional resources aligned with the aims of Early Help, such as Our Place sites.

Our Place's integrated infrastructure and governance systems, relationships with schools and services, and strategies for family engagement were identified as enablers for embedding Early Help within the universal service setting of a school.

### Our Place Definitions

When the term 'Our Place' is used throughout the report, this refers to the organisation that is run by the Colman Education Foundation.

The term the 'Our Place approach' refers to the collaborative efforts of many partners who are involved in the collective implementation of the approach.

Throughout the report, 'Early Help at Our Place' refers to the contractual arrangement that brings Family Service providers together with the organisation Our Place in the universal setting of a school, to jointly deliver the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing's Early Help Family Services trial.

## Evaluation Approach

The overarching question the evaluation of Early Help at Our Place has sought to answer has been:

*How has the Early Help trial been implemented in Our Place settings and how has it contributed to outcomes for children and families?*

Three subset evaluation questions were identified to understand the way in which the trial has unfolded and its intermediate implications for families and the local service system. These include:

1. What short-term impact has the trial had on families in Early Help at Our Place sites?
2. What changes have taken place within the local service system as a result of the trial?
3. How has the trial been implemented, and what have been the barriers and enablers to effective implementation?

The evaluation collected data using various qualitative methods, including observation, reflection tools, in-depth interviews, Most Significant Change methodology, document reviews, and limited quantitative data analysis.

## Emerging findings

### Key emerging findings

- All parents, participating in the evaluation, spoke highly of their experiences in Early Help initiatives.
- In its first 12-months, overall sentiment amongst Early Help teams and Our Place staff, about Early Help has been very positive, with many involved also noting some areas of the initiative that can be strengthened.
- Early Help at Our Place has led to positive and meaningful short-term impacts for families, including increased social and community connections, awareness of and participation in support services, and enhanced parental confidence.
- Changes have occurred within the local service system as a result of the trial, with increased understanding, strengthened relationships, and expanded ways of connecting with and responding to families reported by service providers.

### Impacts for families

The evaluation found that there is consistent agreement that Early Help at Our Place has led to positive and meaningful short-term impacts for families in its initial 12 months.

- Families reported increased social and community connections, reduced social isolation, and the development of supportive friendships.
- Increased awareness of and participation in support services were observed, resulting in positive changes for families.
- Parents' confidence in their parenting skills has improved, notably for those participating in Baby College and playgroups.

*"I was just sitting at home, no friends...and I don't want to sit at home anymore. Then when I got to know these playgroups. After coming here it was so good and I am not alone anymore."*

Playgroup parent

These impacts were observed across a spectrum of family circumstances including those with emerging needs through to those facing complexity.

Both parents and staff have identified several factors contributed to these outcomes, including trust-based relationships between Early Help practitioners and parents, the voluntary nature of family participation, family access to new information and flexible service provision.

*“For myself mainly as a parent [I’m learning] that I am doing a good job, I am good enough to be a Mum....coming here has helped ...I’m learning so much about myself, how to parent, and I actually now feel like I am a good mum.” Baby College parent*

## Changes in the Local Service System

The implementation of Early Help has led to changes in the local service system, with the majority of staff reporting increased understanding and collaboration among service providers and a greater capacity to provide flexible family-centered supports. The extent of change, has however, varied between the two sites. Some providers had begun to adopt a similar approach to Early Help prior to the trial, while for others the trial represented new and, at times, challenging ways of working.

## Implementation and Barriers and Enablers

Implementation of Early Help at Our Place involved the presence of contracted family service providers offering a range of interventions. Key strengths of the model included playgroups and the Baby College program. However, some areas, such as the provision of peer support groups, after-hours service provision and capacity building with the universal service, require further attention.

Several factors influenced implementation:

- The prior existence of established local networks, an understanding of universal settings, and experience in early intervention of family service providers.
- Uncertainty around roles, responsibilities and definitions for Early Help teams and amongst key stakeholders, highlighting the need for greater programmatic guidance and workforce capability frameworks.
- Locating Early Help at Our Place sites which provided valuable opportunities for leveraging existing government investments and optimising the trial's impact.
- Short timeframes of the trial, limiting capacity for early stakeholder engagement and relationship building in the pre-implementation phase.

*“I think there’s been a real shift in practice from [the Early Help team] in terms of previously working in a model where there is intake and assessments done and then practitioners receive a whole suite of information before they start working with the family. Here they are getting to know the families, they are getting to build a rapport and that shifts the way of practice.”*

*Our Place staff member*

## Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, Early Help at Our Place is a successful model of family support and has delivered significant, positive outcomes for families, including increased social connections, increased awareness of support services, and enhanced parenting skills and confidence. The model has facilitated access to families both with emerging and more complex needs, has improved collaboration within local service systems and through inbuilt flexibility, has enabled a more coordinated and family-centered approach. Outcomes and impacts from Early Help can be strengthened in a range of ways, including through greater programmatic guidance and in the implementation of workforce capacity frameworks.



Throughout the trial Our Place has played a valuable role in augmenting the work of Early Help, supporting access to infrastructure, service integration, governance and engagement with families. The expansion of Early Help into additional Our Place sites, in line with the Our Place approach, can leverage existing government investment - further reaching more families in communities where there is identified need.

**Recommendations**

Recommendation 1:	The Early Help Family Services model should be extended and expanded.
Recommendation 2:	The structure of the Early Help model should be continued.
Recommendation 3:	Early Help should be embedded within other Our Place sites with greater clarity around and agreement to expectations across key stakeholders.
Recommendation 4:	Where possible, prioritise the existence of established relationships with local networks, understanding of universal settings and experiences in early intervention, in the procurement process.
Recommendation 5:	Support stakeholder understanding of and buy-in to the model through early engagement, setting sites up for success.
Recommendation 6:	Recognise that Early Help represents a new and different approach to supporting families and communities. Invest in resources to support this change.
Recommendation 7:	Provide longer-term, multi-year funding structures.
Recommendation 8:	Empower the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing regional staff to support local collaboration and outcomes.

*“Everyone’s unique perspective and looking at families from a different lens or knowing families from different entry points [is what different stakeholders bring to Early Help]. They each may have different pieces of information that might be specific to their role but when each service can share that and collaborate, it results in a much richer understanding of a family’s situation and reduces that situation where families might slip through the gaps because not one service necessarily knows the bigger picture.... It enables consistency of approaches in engagement and having a more streamlined approach to managing a child’s behaviour from the family unit to the school environment.... With a multidisciplinary approach, we are more able to come up with a solution that may not have been identified if we were all working in isolation.”* Early Help Team Leader

## 2. Introduction

In 2022 the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (the Department) engaged Our Place to support the delivery of the Early Help Family Services trial (Early Help). The trial is part of system-wide reforms intended to strengthen child and family support by embedding evidence-based, early intervention service delivery within universal service settings in 17 locations across Victoria. Two of the selected sites are Our Place sites, located in the Department regions of Barwon and Inner Gippsland.

Alongside the implementation of the trial at the two Our Place sites, the Department commissioned Our Place to conduct an evaluation of the Early Help trial at Our Place. The evaluation methodology has primarily been qualitative and focusses on the experiences of implementing the trial at Our Place Northern Bay (Barwon) and Our Place Morwell (Inner Gippsland)<sup>1</sup>

The initial phase of the Early Help trial took place between July 2022 and June 2023. While the trial has now been extended into a second year, the evaluation pertains only to the initial 12-month trial period.

The aim of the evaluation was to build insight into how Early Help was implemented and how it contributed to short-term outcomes for children and families in Our Place settings. The evaluation has used a range of qualitative methodologies to understand Early Help at Our Place from the perspectives, experiences and practices of those involved.

This report outlines the findings that have emerged throughout the evaluation and identifies a range of recommendations for consideration for future delivery of the model. As only two trial sites have been included in the evaluation, it is important to recognise that findings may not be applicable to other sites.

Further information about the evaluation can be found in the Early Help Qualitative Evaluation Plan (Appendix A) and Framework (Appendix B).

In reflecting on the work of Early Help and Our Place, it is critical to apply systems thinking and to recognise the interplay between various components of the service system that families interact with. The elements of the trial and the environment in which the trial takes place influence each other. Outcomes for children and families cannot be considered in isolation from how implementation has taken place and the contexts within which this work has occurred.

### Early Help Family Services model

Early Help is an early intervention model of community-based child and family support. It is one of the three 'pathways to support' outlined in the Victorian Government's Roadmap for Reform<sup>2</sup> – a three-year strategy for transforming how children and families are supported in Victoria. With a key focus on service unification and the creation of stronger linkages across the service systems that support children and families, the Roadmap for Reform looks to reshape how organisations and services work together.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that while the delivery of Early Help in the Barwon region extends to other sites beyond the Our Place Northern Bay site, only Early Help activities that have taken place on the Our Place site have been considered in this evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Families Fairness and Housing, *Roadmap for Reform: pathways to support for children and families – Priority setting plan 2021 – 2024*.

Early Help aims to 'strengthen the capability of universal services and communities to prevent and respond to emerging concerns experienced by children and families. Early Help focuses on designing front-end system access points for connecting young people and families to the right advice, information, services and support'.<sup>3</sup> It engages locally based family service providers to deliver a range of individualised and group-based interventions in universal service sites. These interventions include individualised support, group-based activities, flexible funding and capacity building.

The Early Help model represents a new way of working that locates support in the spaces and places that families frequent (such as schools and early learning centres), that expands service access to a wider range of families, doing so early on in their lives, and which facilitates family-centred practice through an in-built flexible approach in both the type of supports provided and the way in which they are offered.

### The Our Place approach

Our Place is a holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in communities experiencing disadvantage by utilising the universal platform of a school. The Our Place approach is built on a strong body of evidence from international research and experts, and the translation of learnings from its lighthouse site at Doveton College.

Our Place does not directly deliver services or programs but rather assists in reshaping existing local services by providing essential resources to drive action, impact, and local innovation so that these services are more accessible to those who need them most.

To achieve this, Our Place locates and develops people, partnerships, knowledge and infrastructure in the universal setting of a school - referred to as 'the Glue', which includes:

- **People:** Our Place local site staff are impartial professionals that have expertise in building relationships between site partners and engaging with communities. Their roles include building partnerships with education providers, local government and service providers, engaging community by providing opportunities for connection and building skills, and supporting service coordination based on the needs of the community.
- **Purpose:** Our Place leads site partners to work together to set and monitor strategic priorities for their communities and to drive greater integration of services at each site. This includes establishment of local Site Partnership Groups to co-design and implement priorities for their community and provide authority for new ways of working.
- **Place:** In partnership with the Victorian Government and local governments, the Our Place approach supports the establishment of integrated infrastructure that enables schools to be the central place for learning and support services.
- **Knowledge:** Our Place works in collaboration with partners to collect, analyse and evaluate data to understand the impact of our work to inform decision-making. This collaborative approach provides a continuous feedback loop and builds the capacity of partners to use the data and learnings to review and improve work on the ground.

Further information can be found on the Our Place website – [www.ourplace.org.au](http://www.ourplace.org.au)

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, *Roadmap for Reform: pathways to support for children and families – Priority setting plan 2021 – 2024*, p. 32.



## Early Help at Our Place

The Department engaged Our Place in Early Help to explore the benefits of implementing the model in settings where additional resources and support, that might aid service integration, are in place. Our Place sites' integrated infrastructure and governance systems, relationships with schools and services, as well as strategies for family engagement, were identified by the Department as enablers to embed Early Help within the universal service setting of a school.

Specifically, Our Place was contracted to support access to space and infrastructure; facilitation, leaderships and partnership building including collaborative governance; community engagement; and data-informed decision-making to support the implementation of Early Help.

The Department contracted family service providers to implement the range of service interventions that comprise the front-end delivery of Early Help. In the Barwon region this involved an initial consortium of three family service providers and included Meli (previously Bethany Community Support and Barwon Child Youth and Family) and Cultura. In Inner Gippsland, Key Assets were engaged as the lead family service provider, alongside Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation.

In seeking to understand the journey of Early Help at Our Place it is important to note the differing contexts of the two Our Place locations where the trial has taken place. Appendix C provides an overview of each of the locations, including a summary of the Our Place sites.

## 3. Method

The aim of the evaluation was to build insight into the implementation of the trial in Our Place settings, to identify the impacts of Early Help on services and local service systems and to identify the initial, short-term outcomes for children and families – through a qualitative approach. The overarching question for the evaluation has been:

**How has the Early Help trial been implemented in Our Place settings and how has it contributed to outcomes for children and families?**

Three subset evaluation questions were identified to understand the way in which the trial has unfolded and its intermediate implications for families and the local service system. They include:

1. What short-term impact has the trial had on families in Early Help at Our Place sites?
2. What changes have taken place within the local service system as a result of the trial?
3. How has the trial been implemented and what have been the barriers and enablers to effective implementation?

### Evaluation approach

The evaluation highlights key learnings and insights as the trial has unfolded over its initial 12-months. It has been designed to assess Early Help in the Our Place context through the capture of stories, experiences and perspectives of those involved. While the evaluation predominantly takes a qualitative approach, select quantitative data (collected by Our Place or Early Help family service providers) has also been used to inform evaluation findings where relevant and able to be sourced (see Appendix A for a copy of the Early Help Evaluation Plan and Appendix B for the Evaluation Framework).

It is important to note that this evaluation does not set out to compare or contrast the two Early Help at Our Place sites. What has emerged, however, is that the experiences of each of the two sites has differed in some significant ways. Thus, there are cases where key successes and / or

key challenges highlighted reflect findings particular to one site. This echoes an overall key finding across the evaluation that context matters and that local settings have significantly influenced the two sites' experiences of implementing the trial.

## Data collection methods

As summarised below, data was collected using a variety of qualitative tools and methods throughout the course of the trial. In addition, a brief review of selected quantitative data took place, focusing on attendance and participation as well as complimentary survey data where available.

Table 1: Methods used throughout the Early Help evaluation.

Observation	Site visits Participation in meetings Participation in family group activities
Reflection tools	Cross-site learning and reflection sessions Online reflection tool Rapid reflection sessions
In-depth staff interviews	A mix of face-to-face and online, recorded interviews
In-depth parent interviews	A mix of face-to-face and phone, recorded interviews
Most Significant Change	Working with individual staff to identify and document examples of change
Document review	Review of key planning and implementation documents
Review of adjacent Our Place Surveys	Review of Our Place Services Surveys Review of Our Place / Monash University Parent Voice Research
Quantitative data review	Focus on attendance, participation and survey data where available.

For further detail on data collection methods applied see Appendix D.

## Evaluation participants and activities

Findings for this evaluation have been informed by a range of structured and semi-structured evaluation activities and consultations. Alongside in-depth interviews the evaluation has included informal conversations, visits to Early Help program activities, regular attendance in governance, operational and planning meetings, facilitated reflection sessions and a document review – all of which have contributed to overall findings for the trial. The following tables provide a brief overview of these evaluation activities.

Table 2: Evaluation responses

	Morwell	Northern Bay
Family responses	14	13
Service provider responses	24	9
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>22</b>

Table 3. Evaluation activities across sites.

	Morwell	Northern Bay
Observations	✓	✓
Rapid reflection sessions	✓	✓
Online staff reflection tool	✓	X
In-depth staff interviews	✓	✓
In-depth family interviews	✓	✓
Most Significant Change stories	✓	✓
Document review	✓	✓
Quantitative data review	✓	✓

### Limitations

A number of limitations should be considered in relation to the evaluation as follows:

- While the analysis has considered available quantitative data, the assessment primarily adopts a qualitative approach and does not encompass findings derived from an extensive participant cohort.
- Only Early Help interventions embedded full time on Our Place sites are explored. Where interventions have been provided in the region but not contractually integrated at the Our Place sites, they have not been included.
- Due to the initial short timeframe of the trial (12 months), the evaluation has been limited to capturing short-term impacts as they have begun to emerge through initial planning and establishment phases. Longer timeframes would be required to understand medium- and long-term impacts.
- The evaluation was unable to source direct parent views on their experiences of one-to-one 'brief individual intervention' support. However, many parents consulted were often in receipt of a range of Early Help supports including individual intervention.
- The evaluation was internally led by Our Place; thus, participant responses may have been influenced with a positive bias and participants may have been hesitant to share critical perspectives.
- The evaluation does not include a comparative analysis of the Early Help model where there is not the presence of Our Place, and thus does not seek to identify causality or attribution. The evaluation, rather, explores contributions to the trial.



## 4. Emerging findings

This section outlines the key findings in line with the three evaluation question domains: short-term impacts for families, impacts for local services and service systems, and trial implementation. The role that Our Place has played within the trial is also considered.

### Key emerging findings

2. All parents, participating in the evaluation, spoke highly of their experiences in Early Help initiatives.
3. Overall sentiment amongst Early Help teams and Our Place staff, about Early Help has been very positive, with many involved also noting some areas of the initiative that can be strengthened.
4. Early Help at Our Place has led to positive and meaningful short-term impacts for families, including increased social and community connections, awareness of and participation in support services, and enhanced parental confidence.
5. Changes have occurred within the local service system as a result of the trial, with increased understanding, strengthened relationships, and expanded ways of connecting with and responding to families reported by service providers.
6. Our Place has played a valuable role in supporting the Early Help trial, augmenting the positive impacts for services and for families.

### What has been the impact on families?

To understand what short-term impact Early Help has had on families, themes were identified across three domains. These include 'social and community connection', 'awareness of and participation in supports and services', and 'parental confidence'. A fourth domain – 'parent-child interactions' was also included in the original evaluation framework however findings in this area did not emerge in the evaluation. Impacts for families in relation to parent-child interactions are likely to emerge with a longer trial timeframe.

### Summary of findings

In the initial 12 months of the trial, substantially positive short-term outcomes are being seen for families engaging in Early Help at Our Place sites. Parents, Early Help teams and Our Place staff are consistently reporting increases in:

- Social and community connection,
- Awareness of and participation in support and services, and
- Parental confidence.

Appendix E contains a range of stories that reflect the improvements families have experienced.

These impacts are emerging for families who have either not had previous engagement with services and support or where this has been limited. Impacts are also occurring for families who are actively engaged in other supports or statutory services (such as child protection) and where those supports and services may not have been meeting family needs (such as where parents may be on a service wait list). The families connecting with Early Help at Our Place span a spectrum of vulnerability and a range of needs – some of which may only require a small amount of support, some who require an immediate response and others that are more complex, requiring multiple and different supports over time. Across this spectrum, Early Help at Our Place is helping to address needs and is having an influence on the service experience of Early Help parents and children.

## PARENT VOICE

In 2023 Our Place conducted a project in partnership with Monash University to capture the voice of parents at Our Place Northern Bay. The research explored the extent to which families are using and supported by wrap-around services onsite and families' feelings of inclusion and connection to people, services and supports. Results indicate that:

- of the 40 parents interviewed, 75% are aware of a range of opportunities offered on site some of which involve Early Help. These include school, before and after school activities, the early learning centre, maternal child health services, playgroup, and community and family events.
- overwhelmingly, parents indicated these services were 'very' or 'extremely helpful'.
- awareness and utilisation of other services onsite varied among parents suggesting an opportunity to further promote and engage them in other services available onsite, including Early Help in terms of individual support, parenting education and Baby College.

Notably, parents have expressed a need for further support in areas that overlap with what Early Help has to offer. These include fostering their children's emotional development, additional support for caregivers and families, social and skill-building activities and assistance to navigate services. Given the alignment of these needs with the aims of Early Help, it is evident that Early Help has a continued role to play in assisting families to meet their identified goals.

Parent Voice Project: Northern Bay Summary Report. Our Place and Monash University

A range of factors are aiding these outcomes for families. These factors include the establishment of trust-based relationships between Early Help practitioners and parents, the friendly and strengths-based approach of practitioners, the voluntary nature of family participation, family access to new information (such as services available) and the flexibility within service provision.

Short-term outcomes for families are emerging from the intervention streams of individual support and group-based delivery, both of which are enhanced by access to flexible funding. Flexibility around the mix and emphasis on the type of support provided to families (e.g. extent of individual support vs group-based delivery) has allowed service providers to tailor their Early Help response according to the needs and opportunities arising in their locations of operation, further enabling a family and community-centred response.

The following provides an overview of short-term impacts that have been seen in the initial 12 months, for families through the evaluation of Early Help.

## Family impact: Increased social connection

An increase in the social connectivity of Early Help families stands out as a key success of the Early Help trial at Our Place sites.

- Families who have been previously disengaged or isolated are now actively participating in Early Help activities such as playgroups, Baby College, and individual support
- Families are engaging in multiple Early Help activities. Participation in one activity often leads to participation in other activities such as individual support leading to involvement in parenting education groups
- Through Early Help parents are developing new friendships and expanding social networks, for example, in Baby College and playgroups

See the following stories in Appendix E for examples:

The Whole Family

Connecting through Supported Playgroup

A Happy Place

Coming Out of Her Shell

Parents shared that their participation in Early Help opportunities helped them to feel more socially connected. A mother noted her isolation at home and how joining playgroup provided her with people to talk to:

*"I was just sitting at home, no friends, we can't go to Melbourne all the time. Just sitting at home with my boy and he was like, he used to stick to me...So after that time I was so upset, and I don't want to sit at home anymore. Then when I got to know these playgroups, I was 'at least we have some other person to talk with'. I can talk to my son but he can't talk to me back [in the same way as an adult]. After coming here it was so good and I am not alone anymore."*

Another mother discussed the friendships she has newly developed through Baby College:

*"One of my goals was to get into the community more because I didn't really have any friends or anything because of the situation I had come out of. But I'm now good friends with [another participant] and with [another participant] too who came to the baby group. I've definitely made some good friends here."*

Baby College lifts the mood of this mother's son and enables them to get out of the house:

*"My son seems really happy and chatty, he seems really happy after we have been to the group...before we went, I wasn't leaving the house at all. I started ordering groceries online or getting other people to bring groceries home. It's been good to get out of the house."*

And for this mother, she notes the increase in support she now has:

*"If it wasn't for this, I'd definitely have a lot less friends, a lot less support because aside from this I've only had my Maternal Health Nurse."*

The friendly, approachable and positive, strengths-based approach taken by Early Help practitioners and created within the groups they facilitated has been a strong theme arising when parents discussed their initial and ongoing experiences in Early Help activities, creating a safe environment in which to foster new social connections.

*"I've always been a bit of a shy person and I don't like to socialise but it was welcoming. Everyone was nice and understanding of the fact that I am a bit shy." Early Help Parent*



## Family impact: Increased awareness of and participation in supports and services

A second area of impact for Early Help families has been an increase in awareness of and participation in supports and services. Through Early Help at Our Place, families are:

- Learning about services of which they were previously unaware
- Accessing services they have not previously accessed
- Participating in programs and activities which they have not previously engaged with.

Early Help practitioners are actively engaging in informing parents about available services, facilitating warm referrals, and in some instances, advocating for parental access to a diverse range of on-site and off-site services and activities. These include health and allied health, specialist family and parenting services, services providing disability, housing or legal support, and community and recreation activities.

Accessing new supports has had significant impacts for families, in some cases leading to positive changes that have been pivotal for their lives. Early Help practitioners shared many examples such as where they were able to refer a mother and her son to speech therapy and sleep school:

*"I had a particular family I was able to refer to a number of services needed. This family is so thankful and feel like they are getting the help they need for their child with speech therapy, sleep school [and] OT."*

Another Early Help Practitioner shared an example of how the initial provision of individual support led to the family joining a number of other Early Help initiatives:

*"I've had a young family come in that had just moved to the area, and they all came in initially for housing. I linked them with youth housing. Mum was going to have a baby and they kept coming into the centre. I got to know them. And now both parents are doing Circle of Security. And the young mum's joined Bumps to Bubs."*

In some cases, practitioners have played an advocacy role enabling family connection to the supports they need:

*"Success was achieved advocating for a client regarding an IVO application ...linking them in to appropriate DV services due to their gender identity and engaging them into mental health supports."*

Similarly, parents highlighted examples where they were now connecting with new opportunities as a result of their initial participation in Early Help:

*"There's a program called something like Women and Career Pathways with Gordon (TAFE), this year I am doing it on Zoom. So, I found out about that through coming here."*

*"We've started now going to the library groups which we didn't do before."*

The following case study demonstrates how learning about and being linked into sleep school dramatically improved life for a mother and her son with better sleep routines in place. The mother experienced improvements in her mental health and wellbeing and her son had improved eating, behaviour and speech.

## CASE STUDY

A family, new to Australia, had been struggling with sleep routines for their young son, resulting in the mother feeling quite distressed, *"I used to sleep for two hours [a day] for three years because he used to cry, ask me to feed him until that training was done. I was so into depression, like I want to sleep, I want to sleep, I want to sleep but I can't sleep."*

Following some brief consultations with an Early Help practitioner, the mother and her son were able to attend sleep school, with pivotal results:

*"[The Early Help Practitioner] says there is this sleep training school and I am 'okay that's a real surprise'. If you want we can apply for a referral and so she applied and after three weeks I got an appointment, I went there and I stay for a four-night program. In that four-night program I saw a lot of difference. Now he is sleeping completely. All by himself. It was a big, big, big relief for me. He was eating much better, he was playing much better, he started talking much better. It's like everything changed in four days. I was like super shocked and everyone over here [at Our Place] when they see him, when I bring him to the playgroup, they say 'is he the same one? Did you change him?' and I was so happy. That was the best part. That was a surprise. We don't know there will be a sleep school."*

### Family impact: Increased parental confidence

Strong themes have emerged around increased parental confidence with Early Help parents sharing powerful stories of how their self-belief and confidence in parenting has improved through Early Help support. Parents have consistently attributed these changes to the strengths-based and supportive approach practitioners have taken. This has included Early Help practitioners being warm and approachable, helping parents to obtain realistic expectations of parenting, normalising the challenges often faced in parenting, building knowledge about early childhood, strengthening skills in parenting and helping parents to identify parenting successes. Parents shared:

*"I never knew about babies' brains and about how what you do effects them so much. Like all about eye contact, playing with them. It's good to know. No one else tells you."*

Baby College has been reassuring for this mother who at times questions her ability as a parent:

*"For myself mainly as a parent [I'm learning] that I am doing a good job, I am good enough to be a Mum. I also have depression, not just anxiety. So, it's like, 'am I good enough'? The first few months I was bawling my eyes out, trying to comfort [my son] and thinking 'you deserve a better mum than me', and all that stuff. Not post-partum depression but a chemical imbalance. I was in a dark place when he was born and coming here has helped.... I'm learning so much about myself – how to parent – and I actually now feel like I am a good Mum."*

For this mother, Baby College has helped to readjust expectations and confidence:

*"I definitely feel more educated on baby stuff and I just feel more confident about being a parent. I remember at the start when [my son] was a fresh newborn I would get my hopes up a lot about how things are supposed to go and how they are supposed to be and then I'd get myself down a lot because I'm like 'I'm not doing anything right, nothing's working'. And I feel like if I didn't have this group to sort of remind me that not all babies are the same – you've just got to adjust to it and stuff like that, I think I would have been held in that mind set of 'I'm just not a good parent.'"*

Early Help practitioners have also shared their observations of increased parental confidence:

*"It has been a privilege to watch their growth and the confidence they now exhibit."*

*"To witness the growth in confidence of parents engaging in Baby College, learning about their children and gaining support from the service and their peers in the group."*

Additionally, increases in parental confidence have also been identified through different measurement tools implemented by Early Help practitioners. These include the Me as a Parent (MaaP) Survey implemented at both Early Help sites<sup>4</sup> and the Karitane Parenting Confidence Scale implemented in Baby College<sup>5</sup>.

### Family impact: Parent-child interactions

Limited evidence of improved parent-child interactions has been identified through the evaluation. This is likely due to the short timeframe of the trial and the longer timelines and investment needed to see a range of outcomes resulting from early intervention.

Emerging evidence did however arise through one case study where a parent shared that their interactions with their children had improved as they were "...spending more time together rather than just sitting on phones and tablets in the same room."

An examination of data arising from the Me as a Parent Survey and other measurement tools used may provide further insight into what is emerging for parent interactions with children.

See the following story  
in Appendix E:

Getting Along Better  
Now

### Early Help impact on families – Key Insights:

- Notable positive short-term impacts for families are being seen.
- Positive short-term impacts for families were highlighted by Early Help practitioners, Our Place staff and families.
- Through Early Help at Our Place, families are expanding their social connections.
- Families' awareness of and participation in supports and services is increasing as a result of Early Help, and this is leading to meaningful improvements in the lives of children and families.
- Parents are reporting a considerable increase in their confidence as parents.
- The welcoming and strengths-based approach taken by practitioners fosters family engagement in supports and short-term outcomes for parents and children.

<sup>4</sup> Access to quality data such as for the MaaP survey has varied between sites - data from the Morwell site limited in detail.

<sup>5</sup> Data from the Karitane Parenting Confidence Scale was available for one site only.

## Early Help Counterfactual Enquiry

As part of the Early Help at Our Place evaluation, Our Place conducted an examination of selected Our Place sites where Early Help is either not currently present or present only in a part time capacity and does not contractually involve Our Place. The aim was to enhance understanding of embedding Early Help at Our Place locations and extended the initial evaluation framework. The enquiry sought to identify local family support systems, including their strengths and challenges as they pertain to Our Place and the Early Help function.

Focus groups were held representing six Our Place sites, reflecting both urban and regional settings.

Overall, the counterfactual enquiry identified the need for additional family supports at Our Place sites and that many families face significant barriers to accessing the services they need. Barriers include a shortage of services available, protracted waiting times, gaps in appropriate services and changeable service availability. In addition, the enquiry identified:

- **Service navigation is a common, ongoing challenge for families**
- **Stigma associated with service engagement limits family help seeking**
- **Additional onsite supports strength the capacity of Our Place sites to respond to families**
- **The degree to which part time Early Help Family Service providers integrate with Our Place sites is variable.**

There would be value in integrated, comprehensive family supports at Our Place sites to provide early intervention where supports are unavailable for families, to assist families with service navigation and in the destigmatisation of help seeking behaviour. In addition, such support would complement the role of Our Place Community Facilitators by bringing resources on site that extend beyond family engaged and are dedicated to family support. Such support would be optimised where support workers are integrated with and embedded in the networks, structures and relationships on site, enabling more families to benefit.

Further information on the Early Help Counterfactual Inquiry at Appendix I.

## What changes have taken place for services and service systems?

To consider the impact that Early Help has had on services and local service systems, findings have been grouped around the themes of 'service collaboration' (how services are working together for greater cohesivity), 'engagement of new families' (accessing those not engaged in the service system/reaching new families), and 'place-based family-centred practice' (meeting the needs of local families).

### Summary of findings

Early Help has demonstrated a difference in the way services are engaging with each other and with families. Services across both sites are reporting an increased understanding of each other, strengthened relationships and partnerships and, expanded and more flexible ways in which they are able to connect with and respond to families.

The degree of this change for service providers, has, however varied across the two sites. For some family service providers this shift represents a greater change to service delivery principles and practice than for others who had begun to implement a similar approach prior to the Early Help initiative.

A family service provider staff member who had previously been working in schools noted:

*“For us the change is not all that dramatic as we had been operating in this way for some time prior to the start of Early Help. We’ve had staff in the school site, we’ve been running parent education programs etc and so for us it is more of an extension of pre-existing practice and perhaps a deepening of relationships onsite.”*

An Our Place staff member who witnessed Early Help implementation on site shared:

*“I think there’s been a real shift in practice from [the Early Help team] in terms of previously working in a model where there is intake and assessments done and then practitioners receive a whole suite of information before they start working with the family. Here they are getting to know the families, they are getting to build a rapport and that shifts the way of practice.”*

Overall, both sites indicate that due to Early Help at Our Place they are better placed to deliver local, place-based, and family-centred services that enables them to reach a wider range of families such as those who are not currently accessing support services or are not engaged with statutory agencies. Services have also reported on the ways in which Early Help at Our Place enabled a more cohesive response to families.

### **Service system impact: Increased collaboration across services leading to a more cohesive response to families.**

Increased collaboration was regularly identified by Early Help teams as a key success of the Early Help trial at Our Place sites. Early Help staff in both trial locations shared that the trial has provided the opportunity to learn more about other services, that they have been able to connect with other services (including schools and early learning centres) through both formal and informal ways, that the sharing of knowledge and expertise across services is taking place, and that warm referrals between services are occurring. Opportunities for joint planning have also emerged.

Themes have emerged around collaboration, a holistic approach to working with families, and improved relationships and communication. A family service provider staff member noted:

*“The collaboration, not only at the structural level, the project advisory group meetings and Our Place, but also with regard to the families. The increased access points to services. The family might be seen by MCH and then it’s just a walk up the corridor to get some individual family support or a walk up the corridor to attend a playgroup – so it’s the ease of access and the warm facilitation of those handovers that I think has been really valuable for the community.”*

Another family service provider senior staff member highlighted how collaboration on site has led to a more comprehensive response to families:

*“I think the difference for us has probably been that collaboration with all the partners within the Centre – so the school and the different services that are coming in so we are probably working in more of a holistic way and our response to the families is more holistic as well.”*



An Early Help Team Leader identified that collaboration between services on site mitigates the risk of families falling in between the supports available and helps with identifying solutions:

*“Everyone’s unique perspective and looking at families from a different lens or knowing families from different entry points [is what different stakeholders bring to Early Help]. They each may have different pieces of information that might be specific to their role but when each service can share that and collaborate, it results in a much richer understanding of a family’s situation and reduces that situation where families might slip through the gaps because not one service necessarily knows the bigger picture.... It enables consistency of approaches in engagement and having a more streamlined approach to managing a child’s behaviour from the family unit to the school environment.... With a multidisciplinary approach, we are more able to come up with a solution that may not have been identified if we were all working in isolation.”*

While positive improvements were generally reported on, there were also examples where the experience has been mixed, requiring further attention. In some instances, collaboration has proved to be an ongoing challenge throughout the course of the trial. For example, differences in how schools and family services operate, as highlighted by family service provider senior staff:

*“I think it’s been a work in progress. I think building those relationships and understanding how the education system differs to the family services space that we’re used to. And so we have, you know, worked very hard to try and make sure that we understood those differences and developed those relationships.... But I do think that the work that’s been done over the last six or so months, seven months has really improved that.”*

Another example highlights the collaboration needed to support families through warm referral:

*“The warm referral process – we don’t get warm referrals from the school, we just get an email to say this is the parent, this the phone number this is where they live and this is what they need, and we have verbal consent from them to work with you. We are then cold calling these families and they’ve got no idea who we are.”* Early Help Practitioner

Results from the Our Place Services Survey also indicate consistently strong levels and support of cross-collaboration amongst partners at both the Northern Bay and Morwell sites throughout the Early Help trial period. At Northern Bay, the majority of respondents rated collaboration as ‘excellent’ in both 2022 and 2023, before and after the Early Help trial commenced. An average score of 4.4 out of 6 (where 6 is the highest score) was found in 2023, while in 2022 it was 5.2. Similarly, at Morwell in 2022, most respondents rated collaboration as ‘excellent’, with an overall rating of 5 out of 6 (the survey has not yet taken place in Morwell in 2023)<sup>6</sup>.

### **Service system impact: Expanded ways to connect with new families.**

By virtue of location on school sites, alongside early learning centres and community-based support services, Our Place settings, as community spaces, means that families are consistently present, providing an ideal environment for Early Help to connect with target families and to provide a more holistic approach to family support. Early Help at Our Place is enabling services to engage with families in new and varied ways. As noted above, families who have had little or no previous engagement in services or have been socially isolated are now being reached.

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<sup>6</sup> Our Place Northern Bay Services Survey. Term 2, 2023.

This is occurring through the co-location, and importantly, the embedding of Early Help within universal school environments. Intentional and proactive integration of Early Help into existing activities has been required to unlock the benefits of co-location (for example 'After-school Cooking' activities, 'Engagement Blitz'), Early Help practitioners taking a hands-on approach to connecting with families (for example initiating conversations in the family tearoom), and through warm referrals from other services and staff onsite. The voluntary nature of family participation has also been highlighted as a valuable, family-centred way that supports connection with new families.

An Early Help Practitioner shared an example of how they reached out to connect with a mother at the school:

*"There's a family at [Our Place] who hadn't really engaged with services, and she would talk to people on and off but had an absolute fear of service intervention and child protection. She's absolutely lovely and it took me weeks to engage her and how I engaged with her – it was actually in the tearoom there at Our Place with her boys early in the morning. So, I'd just pop in there and always have a bit of a chat to her and it took a little while, but now I've actually got her opened [as a case for individual support] in Early Help. I've been doing some work with her around her older daughter at the moment and she was also a bit short on money and so I have given her some strategies and some links so she can apply for a couple of utility grants because you can actually apply for them twice a year. But now she's talking to me regularly... So, it's about making yourself known, like, not being intrusive, I think, just being welcoming and interested in your families. And then once there's that trust you can go from there."*

Early Help Practitioner

What has emerged strongly through the trial is that proactively reaching out is necessary to connect with the families onsite. Family engagement, in this context, cannot be achieved behind closed office doors, as an Our Place Partnership Manager shares:

*"You need to be out where the families are...to be present during school drop-off and pick-up. You need to be able to instigate contact and do that in an authentic, genuine way. It's different to sitting at a desk and receiving referral notes. It's about getting to know the families."*

Overall, family service providers share how the model at Our Place sites enhances access to new and different families:

*"I think there's no way we would have families attending groups or popping in for a chat or becoming comfortable in this space if we weren't there. It's fantastic that that there is a hub ...with no pressure on [families] having to attend anything... The voluntary nature of what we do and [the] Our Place hub encourages families to engage with us in a way that quite often you don't get if a family has to come into a separate place to attend. They can be really fearful of that, it can be really intimidating, so to be able to have a space where that fear is removed somewhat...So many families just wouldn't, I don't think, reach out and ask for that support or share their issues or share their vulnerabilities if it wasn't situated the way it was...It just removes that stigma of asking for help..."* Senior Staff Member, Family Service Provider

### Our Place Engagement Blitz

Each school term Our Place run an 'Engagement Blitz' at one of the Early Help trial sites, providing the opportunity for Our Place staff and onsite services to engage with parents at the school entrance. Having an active presence at school drop-off time and linking into Our Place initiatives has provided an effective way for Early Help practitioners to reach out and connect with new local families.

One Early Help practitioner shared '*In this morning's Engagement Blitz I provided information and options for a grandparent to pass onto her daughter who has separated from her partner. The main issue is co-parenting for the separated parties and the impact that separation has had on the children and their behaviour.*'

See the following case study stories in Appendix E:

Families Now at the Centre

Whiteboards and Pizza

Just Across the Corridor

Coffees in the Our Place Foyer (vignette)

Immediate support at Morwell Park (vignette)

## Service system impact: Services positioned well to meet the needs of local families and communities (family-centred practice)

Early Help at Our Place is enabling services to shift towards family-centred practice with a range of clear and compelling examples emerging. Shifting services to the places that families frequent, such as schools, situates service delivery, first and foremost, around what works for families. In addition, the strengths-based approach of Early Help at Our Place, which aims to reframe service engagement as a universally positive step, represents an impactful shift towards a more family-centred approach to service delivery.

At the individual family level, Early Help and Our Place staff have highlighted that a family-centred approach has been enabled through the specific contract structure of Early Help which provides both the means and the authorisation for providers to:

- Get to know families, build relationships and trust
- Be a service that is accessed by families voluntarily
- Provide a timelier response when family concerns are raised, before issue escalate
- Provide warm referrals and assistance to navigate service access
- Shift between intervention streams according to the needs of the families
- Access flexible funding enabling diverse responses to varied family needs

One of the Early Help Team Leaders describes the ability to meet families 'where they are at':

*"...perhaps a parent may have some social anxiety, so just trying to gently find different ways to welcome them and support them in engaging in a program and them feeling like they don't have to necessarily fit to our timeframe or routine. That they can take from it what works for them and you know, adapting a response to meet the client where they're at and support them to achieve things they want to achieve in a timeframe that is suitable to them."*

Early Help practitioners reflect on ways in which the Early Help model enable them to work in more family-centric ways. A practitioner highlights the flexibility of the Early Help model:

*"I feel I've been able to support families in a more flexible way - that really responds to their needs both in the here and now but also for the longer term. We try to build the resources and self-belief that parents can draw upon into the future which feels like a better way of working."*

And another notes the value of timely support for family engagement:

*"I see a difference with parents [if they have been warm referred] because they are more willing to speak to us because we can deal with it [the family's issues] then and there. We can go through what is going on for them in that moment and what it is we can support with right now and what we can support with moving forward which makes a big difference."*

At the local community level, Early Help and Our Place staff have noted that place-based, family-centred practice has occurred through the provision of specific initiatives tailored to the needs of families and to the particular opportunities available onsite. Examples include the engagement of a bi-cultural worker in playgroups as a response to the high numbers of Karen and Karenni families participating, and project trials set up to address high levels of absenteeism in the schools.

*“We’ve done a lot of joint planning and that planning is now starting to be really informed by the voice of families and their needs. We’re getting towards a good space where strong relationships and rapport with the families is helping to get that voice into the planning on what we do onsite and those themes we need to address. And also, those connections, that are really critical with the school, particularly the wellbeing team and the early years centre to address what’s being said.”* Our Place Partnership Manager

Senior Staff Members, Family Service Providers note:

*“Just providing that support, that the flex funding, and the amount of flex funding, has enabled us to provide for the community.”*

*“I think having that flexibility in the trial is really good. Within the constraints that we have, we’re free to trial different things which is exciting to actually meet the needs of the community we are servicing.”*

Throughout the evaluation there have been strong themes around how flexible funding has supported family-centred practice both at an individual support level and at the community level as outlined above. This element of the Early Help model has positioned services well for responding to a wide range of family needs in a wide range of ways and has included family access to material aid, health and allied health assessments and supports, and recreational activities.

Alongside services noting this as a strength of Early Help, it has also been identified as an area of the program that may benefit from greater programmatic guidance to strengthen strategic management and expenditure of funds.

### Early Help impacts on Services / Service System – Key Insights:

- The Early Help trial has led to and enabled shifts for family service providers and localised onsite service systems engaged in Early Help at Our Place sites.
- Services are reporting increased collaboration between services, however the degree to which this is the case varies between the two trial sites.
- Services are reporting expanded ways to engage with new families through co-location, service integration and warm referrals.
- Services are better placed to implement family-centred practice – responding flexibly to family and community identified need.
- The structure of the Early Help model, including the availability of flexible funding and the voluntary nature of family participation has supported family-centred practice at the individual family level and at the local community level.

## How has the trial been implemented?

Implementation of Early Help at Our Place has involved the presence of contracted family service providers in Our Place sites providing individual support and a range of group activities for children and families in line with the Department's stipulated intervention streams (as outlined above and in the Department's Early Help Operational Guidelines). Further to these interventions specified in the original Early Help model, Early Help in Our Place settings has involved the intended addition of 'universally targeted groups' which incorporates the Our Place-designed Baby College program and universally accessed, supported playgroups.

### Summary of findings

Implementation of Early Help at Our Place involved the presence of contracted family service providers offering a range of interventions. Key strengths of the model included playgroups and the Baby College program. However, some areas, such as the provision of peer support groups, after-hours service provision and capacity building with the universal service, require further attention.

Several factors influenced implementation:

- The prior existence of established local networks, an understanding of universal settings, and experience in early intervention of family service providers.
- Uncertainty around roles, responsibilities and definitions for Early Help teams and amongst key stakeholders, highlighting the need for greater programmatic guidance and workforce capability frameworks.
- Locating Early Help at Our Place sites which provided valuable opportunities for leveraging existing government investments and optimising the trial's impact.
- Short timeframes of the trial, limiting capacity for early stakeholder engagement and relationship building in the pre-implementation phase.

### Pre-implementation

The process of contracting family service providers and timelines around stakeholder engagement in the pre-implementation stage have had impacts for Early Help implementation.

For example, the presence of pre-existing relationships within local networks, alongside an understanding of universal setting-based and early intervention work has illustrated that these factors, significantly enhance the establishment and implementation of the Early Help model in new locations.

At one of the trial sites, a family service provider had been both planning for and working in ways closely aligned with the Early Help approach for some time. They had had a long-term presence in the local community and had experience of working in schools in a place-based way. In particular, the family service provider's experience in closely collaborating and partnering with multiple stakeholders has shown to be significantly valuable given the relational and systems-thinking approach required for effective service delivery within a place-based context. Given this, they were well placed to expedite effective service delivery in what can otherwise be a complex transition to new ways of working.



Additionally, the timing of stakeholder engagement has also influenced the strength of Early Help implementation. Establishing a shared understanding of the scope and aspirations of the Early Help model, a collective commitment to both these and agreed ways of working is essential for success. The trial has shown that when bringing a new group of stakeholders together, time is required for these shared elements to be developed, thus highlighting the benefits of engaging stakeholders as early as possible and prior to implementation where possible.

### Operational guidance

In considering the implementation of Early Help, the need for greater operational guidance consistently arose as a significant challenge for both Early Help teams and Our Place staff. Several elements of the Early Help model remained unclear throughout the trial ranging from higher level objectives, best practice and ways of working through to roles and responsibilities and intervention protocols. The table below provides an overview of where programmatic detail can be strengthened.

- Procurement considerations:**
- Experience working, and established networks within, target community
  - Experience in and understanding of working in a school environment
  - Understanding of and commitment to collaborative ways of working and systems thinking
  - Commitment to and processes for evaluation / evaluative thinking and reflective practice
  - Experience and understanding of early intervention

Table 4: Areas of the Early Help at Our Place model requiring greater program guidance

Program objectives	Outlining the vision for what partners are coming together to work towards – what success looks like
Definitions and scope	Greater clarity around the terms used for example, what is meant by ‘early intervention’, ‘capacity building in universal services’.
Ways of working	For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how early intervention should be provided</li> <li>• the requirement for a partnership approach</li> </ul>
Working in partnership	Outlining what working in partnership requires and involves, what makes it successful, particularly in a school setting
Roles and responsibilities	Clarity around role and responsibilities between key stakeholders including the interface between partners and boundaries
Intervention protocols	Such as for the strategic and timely expenditure of brokerage

An Early Help team member expressed the lack of clarity they experienced:

*“It would be good to identify what is early intervention, what’s in scope for that, what is way out of it, what sits just above it and what’s in it. I’ve been here nearly 6 months and I still don’t actually know.”*

As outlined above, a shared understanding of the Early Help model amongst stakeholders is essential for efficient and effective service delivery. What has emerged through the trial is that programmatic guidance plays a pivotal role in supporting stakeholder unification (including essential relationships) and the capacity to work effectively towards clear goals. This was also highlighted through the importance of the Department's regional representatives being able to clearly articulate the aspirations and scope for the trial to reinforce its policy intent, including in local project advisory group (PAG) discussions. This authorisation and engagement can provide important endorsement and consistency of message, particularly on new ways of working and sharing best practice across sites.

## Activities

Early Help practitioners have been located on the Early Help at Our Place trial sites between 4 and 5 days per week for drop-in family support and to facilitate and co-facilitate family engagement activities such as After-school Cooking and After-school Games, parenting education programs such as Bringing Up Great Kids and Snack Attack (healthy snacks information session) and universally targeted, support groups such as Baby College and playgroups.

Practitioners also engaged in capacity building with universal and other services both on and off site, however there were variations in the degree and nature of this across the two sites.

Early Help teams worked in close collaboration with Our Place staff to ensure an integrated approach to implementation, in many cases co-facilitating family engagement activities such as those mentioned above.

Appendix F outlines the activities delivered at each of the Early Help at Our Place trial sites.

## Early Help interventions unique to Our Place

The provision of specific 'universally targeted groups' was an Our Place addition to the suite of interventions outlined in original guidelines and as part of contractual arrangements with family service providers at the two Our Place Early Help trial sites. These groups include supported playgroups and the Our Place-designed Baby College program both of which are universally accessible for families yet are designed to provide fit-for-purpose supports.

Both the playgroups and the Baby College programs delivered throughout the trial have been overwhelmingly successful and their role in Early Help has been significant. Both Baby College and playgroups have provided a pivotal opportunity to engage many families in the early and influential stages of parenting, to provide evidence-based support, to build parental confidence and connection, and to link families into additional services and opportunities.

A review of the Baby College and Playgroup programs can be found at Appendix G.

## Activities that require further consideration

The evaluation of Early Help at Our Place has identified two areas of Early Help service delivery that either did not take place or where there was limited service provision.

The first of these is the delivery of peer support groups which did not occur at either of the two Early Help at Our Place sites. It should be noted however that Early Help peer support groups were delivered in a nearby setting in one of the Early Help regions. Services have noted the value of peer support groups and have highlighted this would be an area of priority in the next stages of implementation.

The second area involves the provision of activities and services out of usual business hours which family service providers indicated was difficult to provide throughout the trial. In this case services pointed to staff safety and duty of care, noting the limited presence of other staff at such times as a key barrier. Services have identified that the development of policies and procedures, that ensure staff safety, would need to occur prior to such service provision taking place and that as yet this had not occurred.

It is valuable to note, however, that while not necessarily outside of usual business hours, Early Help activities/supports were delivered during holiday periods when more often than not, service provision across the sector drops off. This is particularly the case during the Christmas period, yet a continued Early Help touchpoint was offered throughout this period, with uptake from families, thus maintaining important connections for parents and children at these times.

## Timeline

The Early Help trial was initially implemented over the 12 months: July 2022 – June 2023, with pre-implementation activities beginning in January 2022 when preliminary discussions took place between Our Place and the Department. A timeline of the trial can be found at Appendix H.

## Workforce capability

Themes around the skills, experience and attributes of Early Help staff arose through the evaluation as a critical component to the success of Early Help. Notably the appointment of staff with previous experience in and an understanding of place-based early intervention with families has been identified as a key enabler for engaging and building trust with families, for working effectively in universal settings, for implementing early intervention and for building strong collaborative relationships with other stakeholders.

Where Early Help staff came to the trial with prior experience, that was more heavily weighted in tertiary family intervention, the need for a greater shift in practice approach was identified. Greater programmatic guidance (as outlined above), alongside workforce capability frameworks and capacity building have been identified as useful ways to respond to challenges associated with new ways of working and strengthen professional practice.

### Early Help implementation – Key Insights:

- The initial phase of the Early Help trial took place over 12 months, June 2022 – June 2023
- Activities were delivered across all intervention streams at both sites, however peer support groups and out of hours activities were not provided at either of the two sites.
- Services have identified that policies and procedures need to be developed to support the safe provision of out-of-hours activities and supports.
- Baby College and Playgroups are a unique component of Early Help at Our Place and have been successful element of the trial.
- Clearer programmatic guidance, workforce capability frameworks and capacity building would strengthen Early Help professional practice.

## Locating Early Help at Our Place sites

The benefits of locating Early Help at Our Place sites have been consistently identified throughout the trial and while a range of challenges have also been noted, overall, placing Early Help at Our Place sites has been positive in achieving the trial's outcomes and aligning with the overall ambitions of the Victorian Government's partnership with Our Place.

In the initial stages of planning, prior to trial commencement, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing identified Our Place as a suitable partner due to the long-term partnership and commitment from government to support service delivery at Our Place sites. Including Our Place within the trial was seen as an opportunity to learn about Early Help within this context.

Through placement at Our Place sites, Early Help teams have had access to people resources, purpose-built places from which to operate (in one case this has however come with a financial cost), collaborative governance structures that support service integration and evaluation capacity, complementing stipulated reporting requirements.

In the initial stages of the trial, uncertainties amongst partners were present around the role that Our Place would play. While the role of Our Place had been included in initial contract discussions and documentation, some family service providers were uncertain about what the Our Place role would look like in practice and what the associated benefits of this would be. In some cases, there had been the sense that the Our Place role was unnecessary, given contracted family service provider's previous experience of place-based and school-located work. However, as the trial progressed with Our Place staff taking a range of practical steps to support Early Help alongside active efforts in relationship building and established governance structures, the value of Our Place's involvement became more apparent for stakeholders involved.

Themes that emerged throughout the evaluation regarding the benefits of, challenges of and insights gained from linking Early Help with Our Place and are detailed further below; however, of note are the following:

- There is opportunity to be based within purpose-built hub settings.
- Practitioners are enabled to reach new families in a range family-centered ways.
- Early Help's capacity to respond to local need is strengthened.
- Site integration is facilitated through the Our Place partnerships approach – building relationships, providing governance and driving collaboration.
- The extent to which success on site can be achieved lies in the degree to which family service providers understand, commit to and adopt the process of working within site-based governance structures and in collaboration with site partners.

In hearing from Our Place staff, some of the challenges shared were not dissimilar to those noted by Early Help partners around uncertainty of scope, boundaries and the authority of Our Place in the Early Help context.

*“Through the journey we've had to try and find what our role is within all this, how to navigate our influence, but I feel like we have reached a place where a lot of the things happening now wouldn't necessarily be happening if it wasn't through the connection Early Help has with Our Place. So, I feel like more and more, others are seeing our value in the space of capacity building, more and more.”* Our Place Staff Member.

The two Early Help at Our Place site locations are well positioned, demographically, to access the families that Early Help aims to reach. Our place sites are established in communities where families experience high levels of socio-economic disadvantage. By locating Early Help in school settings within these communities, Early Help is directly able to reach families across a spectrum of need, including those with emerging needs, with access to the additional supports provided by the Our Place approach.

Our Place sites are located in 10 locations across Victoria representing regions where early intervention and support can have a meaningful and much needed impact. The two initial Early Help at Our Place trial sites – Northern Bay and Morwell, are two locations where Early Help is proving to have a positive and impactful influence in families' lives.

### Community relationships and engagement

Our Place has supported Early Help relationships and engagement in a range of ways. This has occurred through:

- Linking Early Help teams, school staff, early learning centre staff, local government and onsite services through advisory groups, operational groups and networking opportunities
- Promoting Early Help services to families through media platforms (website, newsletters, Facebook) and through direct warm referrals
- Providing opportunities for Early Help practitioners to connect with new families through Our Place-led family engagement activities
- Representing the needs of local families in Early Help planning and in leading targeted project collaborations

Family service provider senior staff members identified that Our Place has supported Early Help by utilising existing local knowledge and acting as a central point to facilitate valuable local linkages between services and with families.

*"I would have to say Our Place has really supported that [collaboration / partnerships] because I'm not on site, so you know, Our Place being on site, having those connections, doing those surveys with families, having that direct contact, just being out there and being able to support those connections between Maternal Child Health and the Family Services team, supporting parents and the Early Help trial team with their drop in, being physically present at the site and having the local data and the information ...and bringing that information to our attention and then sort of workshopping, 'OK, what can we do?' - that's been really helpful for the program to be more responsive to the needs and opportunities in a range of ways." Senior Staff Member, Family Service Provider*

The continual presence of Our Place on site, alongside the knowledge of the site and community that Our Place brings to Early Help has been recognised as valuable in guiding Early Help service delivery:

*"The Our Place Community Facilitators are on site all the time – so those relationships, the understanding of what that centre and the school's needs are which has been able to support our change of service delivery or our implementation of things. So that's been really beneficial." Early Help Team Leader*



## Facilitating access to space and infrastructure

Our Place has facilitated Early Help access to space and infrastructure in universal settings that are intentionally designed to support service integration and that are welcoming and suited to families and children. While some challenges associated with access to space were encountered (such as unanticipated room hire fees, outlined below), by being situated on Our Place sites and a part of Our Place governance structures, Early Help has been able to access dedicated office space, consulting rooms and group activity spaces. Early Help teams have acknowledged the value of this:

*"It's great to be placed at the school where the families are and the other services and community groups. It kind of brings it all together and I think creates a focal point which for us helps us to access new families and for families, I think, creates a sense of belonging. I think it works really well."* Early Help Practitioner

Another Early Help practitioner noted that Early Help at the Our Place site has enabled access and connection with more families and with other service providers:

*"I've loved the opportunity to have been able to be a part of the Our Place site. It's been great actually because I feel I've made a lot of connections. I've met a lot more clients, you know, like people that access the services on site and as much as some flick between the two sites, there's so many new ones. You know, and I've caught up with, met more maternal child health nurses too."* Early Help Practitioner

In the early stages of the trial, unanticipated challenges arose when family service providers were faced with room access fees at one of the sites. Here the central hub building, where Our Place and other services operate from, is managed by the local Council who charge for room hire. While a way forward was found for Early Help at this site, the fees were an unexpected service delivery cost, highlighting the need to consider room hire within funding agreements.

*"Coming on to council sites, there is an expectation that we pay for room hire. That isn't cheap. You know that without some of this additional funding that the Early Help trial has brought, we actually wouldn't be able to afford it."* Senior Staff Member, Family Service Provider

Constraints such as the lack of dedicated spaces for playgroups and the location of the consulting rooms at one of the sites were also noted, suggesting the value of dedicated spaces and visible consulting rooms:

*"It would be wonderful if there was a little space there that could be a playgroup space, rather than having to, you know, use a very large multi-purpose room that has to be set up and packed up."* Senior Staff Member, Family Service Provider

*"I think it's great as long as you're out engaging with the families. I think that's absolutely critical...I spent quite a bit of time initially out in the foyer and reception area just greeting people so that families knew about us, because where the Early Help office is located - way up the back of the centre, is not the best location."* Early Help Practitioner

## Leading collaborative governance

Our Place has supported a collaborative governance approach to Early Help. By convening the Early Help Project Advisory Groups and linking Early Help into Our Place-established Site Partnership and Site Services Advisory Groups, Our Place has provided avenues for the work of Early Help to be strategically integrated, helping to embed Early Help in effective ways.

*"I think [the Partnership Manager] is really proactive and has been pulling everyone together and being that point of reference where we could feed into Our Place on, you know, whether it be the programs that we're running or the work that [they] had done with the school and making sure that [they] fed that back to us around different priority areas and things like that."* Senior Staff Member, Family Service Provider.

*"The Our Place Community Facilitators and Partnership Managers are excellent in being able to, I suppose, see the bigger picture and the connections between all of the services and identify ways that we might be able to work better together so yeah, I think it's a brilliant model."* Early Help Team Leader

Our Place has also played a 'brokering' or support role when challenges have arisen between Early Help stakeholders, as one Early Help Team Leader identified:

*"There has been a relationship breakdown with the school. I'm not sure why or where it has come from. There was an issue around the [family] wellbeing updates... I did raise [with the Our Place Partnership Manager] that I wasn't sure how to repair that relationship with the Wellbeing Team and so I have asked for her assistance...to help us work on that partnership."*

Challenges were, however, also present in relation to roles and expectations between Our Place and Early Help family service providers, as an Early Help Practitioner highlights:

*"...well sometimes there's a breakdown in relationship between [family service provider] and Our Place.... I believe sometimes there is a bit of a breakdown, [about] what's expected and what's meant to be happening."*

This suggests that continued efforts to build clarity around roles and expectations would assist greater alignment amongst stakeholders and would support positive working relationships.

Importantly, a substantial strain that has continued at one of the sites has been a lack of engagement by family service providers with existing onsite collaborative governance processes. This limited engagement has hampered integration between services and, at times, placed strain on the long-term relationships between site partners.

While Our Place has played a valuable role in leading a collaborative governance and partnership approach to Early Help, the degree to which successful integration (and associated outcomes) can occur, lay in the extent of family service provider commitment to and participation in these processes. It has been noted that this challenge is not distinct to Early Help at Our Place sites and thus what has emerged throughout the trial and the broader Our Place experience, is that without this commitment in both principle and practice, a relational risk for the wider Our Place investment begins to emerge.

## Building and using evidence

The Early Help partnership with Our Place has also brought qualitative evaluation expertise and the facilitation of shared learning opportunities between the two trial sites, enabling the use of data to guide planning and implementation. This has included:

- Linking Our Place sourced data with Early Help planning through Early Help project advisory group and operational meetings
- Qualitative evaluation of the Early Help trial at Our Place sites
- Documentation of family stories emerging from Early Help
- Facilitation of cross-site learning and reflection sessions throughout the trial

Additionally, opportunities to help strengthen Early Help implementation through evidence-based capacity building activities were identified by Our Place. At one site, this included provision of a workshop on outcomes-based practice for Early Help playgroup facilitators and identification of evidence-based parenting training for Early Help teams.

### Locating Early Help at Our Place sites – Key Insights:

- Early Help teams believe Our Place has made meaningful and substantial contributions to Early Help at Our Place sites
- Locating Early Help at Our Place sites has seen a range of benefits that include governance support, facilitation of access to infrastructure, partnerships, family engagement and the building and use of evidence
- As the trial unfolded, clarity on the role and contribution of Our Place increased amongst trial stakeholders

*“At the risk of sounding overly proud, I don’t think it is a coincidence that we do have these high numbers in programs. I think in really simple terms if you are talking about the value add [of Our Place] you just have to look at the participation numbers across the site.”*  
Our Place Staff Member.



## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

Significant, positive outcomes are being seen for families engaging in Early Help at Our Place sites. Families are reporting increased social connections, awareness of and participation in supports and services and in parenting skills and confidence and has been a consistent view amongst families participating in the evaluation.

Positioning family service providers at Our Place sites has expanded service access to and engagement with families with emerging and with more urgent and complex needs and the Our Place approach supports this to occur in a range of ways.

The flexible, voluntary and relationship-based nature of the Early Help model has better enabled services to respond to presenting needs in ways that are timely and that place parents and children at the centre.

Services and local service systems, are working more collaboratively and in more coordinated and joined-up ways, meaning that families are better supported to access the services they need.

While many successful short-term outcomes have begun to emerge, a number of ways in which Early Help at Our Place can be strengthened have also been identified. These include exploring and responding to the specific needs and opportunities for Early Help in local communities; early engagement of stakeholders in the establishment and pre-implementation phases to support the integration of Early Help into new locations and settings; greater programmatic detail around roles and responsibilities, definitions, scope and objectives to support shared understandings amongst stakeholders and which is integral to the success of stakeholder relationships.

Overall, it is critical to note that it is likely the combination of and interplay between the range of factors and conditions mentioned throughout this report that have contributed to Early Help's success. Considering this work through a systems-thinking lens acknowledges that there is no single solution or no single condition that facilitates family engagement and early uptake of supports. The Early Help trial in Our Place settings has demonstrated that it is both a variety of conditions and the nature of those conditions working in unison that supports better outcomes for children, families and communities.

Trialling Early Help in two Our Place locations has provided valuable emerging insight into the benefits and challenges of such an approach and begins to identify a number of key enablers for success. Extending the trial to and embedding the model within multiple Our Place sites would likely foster greater insight into the implications of scaling the model and how this looks in a range of differing contexts.

### Recommendations

#### 1. The Early Help Family Services model should be extended and expanded.

The trial of Early Help at Our Place has demonstrated that it has led to significant short-term outcomes for families which are expected to deepen over time.

#### 2. The structure of the Early Help model should be continued.

This includes presence in and integration with universal settings; relationship and strengths-based family practice; voluntary participation; flexible nature of service provision and support provided by Our Place, all of which have contributed to Early Help success.



3. **Early Help should be embedded within other Our Place sites, with greater clarity around and agreement to expectations for ways of working across key stakeholders, to benefit from the government's investment in the model.**

Significant successes and learnings have been identified through trialling Early Help in Our Place settings. Expansion of the model to other Our Place sites would support outcomes for more families, build on the learnings to date and capitalise on the government's initial investment in the model. For this to be most successful, requirements around working in alignment with the Our Place approach including governance processes and working as a collaborative partnership with stakeholders should be included in procurement processes.

4. **Where possible, prioritise the existence of established relationships with local networks, understanding of universal settings and experience in early intervention, in the procurement process.**

The presence of pre-existing relationships within local networks, alongside an understanding of universal setting-based and early intervention work for family service providers has shown to have been of significant benefit in optimising the establishment of the Early Help model in new locations. Prioritising these conditions, where possible, alongside family service provider commitment to and capacity for collaborative ways of working, would capitalise on Early Help investment.

5. **Support site stakeholder understanding of and buy-in to the model through early engagement, setting sites up for success.**

Early engagement of key site stakeholders, including schools, early learning centres, family service providers, other onsite services, and DFFH regional representatives in pre-implementation / procurement phases is critical. This enables shared understanding of the scope and aspiration for Early Help, shared commitments and agreed ways of working, prior to implementation.

6. **Recognise that Early Help represents a new and different approach to supporting families and communities.** Invest resources in and provide incentives that support this change.

Early Help requires different ways of thinking and different ways of working. To strengthen this new approach, there should be:

- Investment in greater programmatic guidance – including further detail on stakeholder roles and responsibilities, definitions, scope and objectives.
- Investment in best practice frameworks and workforce capability building – to facilitate and strengthen the unique knowledge, mindsets, and skills necessary for new ways of working.
- Qualitative reporting requirements that incentivise quality practice approaches to implementation

7. **Provide longer-term, multi-year funding structures.**

The initial 12-month timeframe is too short a time period in which to establish a new initiative such as Early Help. Expanding timeframes would likely enable sites to better set up for success and advance the successful outcomes seen to date. Extended timeframes would also: support relationship building amongst stakeholders and with families, enable services to respond to challenges identified in the early stages of the trial, support services to build on current success and, recognise that time is required for system-change and impacts to be seen at scale.

8. Empower the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing regional staff to support local collaboration and outcomes.

Positioning the Department's regional representatives to engage with project advisory group stakeholders to promote the policy aspirations of and guidance around Early Help would likely further assist in embedding new ways of working and the sharing of best practice across sites.

*'Removing the stigma, making families feel comfortable and connected without any pressure. I think is a huge shift and you know, even if it takes one, two, three times of a family just walking by and popping in to have a look or picking up some material aid. Knowing that they can come in and join any of the groups whenever they want. By the time potentially fourth term comes around, they may stick around for that extra chat if they're feeling overwhelmed by whatever might be going on for them.*

*Having that ability to feel safe to open up and ask for help or not even necessarily ask for help, but just to attend and be connected and meet other people and other families. That's a really special thing that we can offer these families and trying to break generational trauma and trying to have an impact in a community that is so entrenched in trauma of various sorts, you know, it's going to take a long time, but what we've seen already is for some families, it's made the world of difference for them.'*

Early Help Family Service Provider Staff Member

## References

Department of Families Fairness and Housing. (2021). Roadmap to Reform: pathways to support for children and families – Priority setting plan 2021 – 2024.

Blewitt, C. Sun, Y. and Skouteris, H. Fraser, A and O'Donnell, J. (2023). Parent Voice Project: Northern Bay Summary Report. Monash University and Our Place

Our Place Northern Bay Services Survey. Term 2, 2023.

## Appendices

- A. Early Help at Our Place Evaluation Plan
- B. Early Help at Our Place Evaluation Framework
- C. Site profiles
- D. Data collection methods
- E. Case Studies and Most Significant Change Stories (see also table 5. below)
- F. Implementation activities overview
- G. Universally targeted groups (playgroups and Baby College)
- H. Implementation timeline
- I. Early Help Counterfactual Enquiry

*Table 5: Case Studies, Most Significant Change Stories and Vignettes included as part of the Evaluation of Early Help at Our Place. Refer to appendix E.*

Case Studies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Families now at the centre – practitioner perspective</li><li>2. Just across the corridor</li><li>3. Mother of eight</li><li>4. Returning to work as a young mum</li><li>5. The whole family</li><li>6. Whiteboards and pizza</li></ol>
Most Significant Change Stories	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Baby College as an anchor</li><li>2. Coming out of her shell</li><li>3. Connecting through supported playgroup</li><li>4. It's a happy place</li><li>5. Getting along better now</li><li>6. Returning to work</li></ol>
Vignettes	11 brief snapshots outlining a range of Early Help experiences that emerged throughout the trial.

# Early Help Qualitative Evaluation Plan

## September 2022

*This document provides an overview of, and sets out a plan for, the Our Place qualitative evaluation of the Early Help at Our Place trial.*

### Acknowledgement of Country

*Our Place welcomes all families and children. We acknowledge the First Nations people of Australia and Traditional Custodians of the lands that we live and work on. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background to the Early Help Trial

The *Roadmap for Reform: Strong families, safe children* was launched in April 2016. It is the Victorian Government’s blueprint for strengthening families and communities so that children and young people can be safe and thrive. In 2018, the Roadmap was updated and laid out an approach to driving system transformation through three ‘pathways to support’ over a three-year timeframe: 1) Early help, 2) Targeted and specialist, 3) Continuing care.

The Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) has engaged Family Service providers, in universal settings at 17 locations across Victoria, commencing the Early Help pathway to support stream with a trial of the ‘Early Help Family Services’ initiative from May 2022 – June 2023. Two of the locations identified for the trial include Our Place service sites – Morwell and Northern Bay, with Our Place engaged as a partner to provide additional support and facilitation at these locations.

The Early Help Trail aims to support more people, more often – early in need and early in life. The Trail seeks to demonstrate the impact of a service model that increases the accessibility and acceptability of early support to families with emerging needs in universal settings.

Broadly, the Trial aims to contribute to system level outcomes including:

- **Build capability in universal services**, including education and primary health, for identifying and responding to child wellbeing concerns.
- **Improve participation in universal services** for vulnerable children and families, including access to education and primary health services.
- **Build capability in the system** to better connect children and their families to the right services, early in need.
- **Strengthen communities to actively participate** in the support of vulnerable children and families through identifying early help needs and helping behaviours.

At the two Our Place Early Help implementation sites, Our Place draws together key service agencies, within the universal Our Place school settings to facilitate Early Help implementation grounded in the Our Place values, approach and ways of working.

Through the course of the Early Help trial, Our Place will provide a range of ‘process’ supports including assistance with infrastructure, governance and the facilitation of partnership relations. Our Place will also support data-informed decision making through a range of program monitoring and data collection processes and in the facilitation of cross-site learning activities.

There is an increasing body of research that parenting support that incorporates evidence-based practice into delivery, improves outcomes for children. A significant challenge is ensuring not only that supports are available and accessible to families but that families can access these services and, the service is acceptable to them.

Early Help Family Services (EHFS) is designed to overcome these challenges by locating evidence-based support in universal services where families are already engaged. The definition of “universal services” includes schools, early childhood services and health services. This will not only increase families’ access to support services but go some way to normalising parenting skill development and help seeking.

Early Help Family Services : Operational Guidelines and Performance Framework. DFFH

## 1.2 Purpose of this plan

The Early Help at Our Place Qualitative Evaluation Plan (the plan), produced by the Our Place Research and Evaluation (RE) team, sets out a framework for the qualitative evaluation of the Early Help trial within Our Place settings.

The purpose of the plan is to ensure a shared understanding, across key Early Help stakeholders, about the nature and purpose of the Early Help at Our Place qualitative evaluation led by Our Place.

The plan outlines the context in which the evaluation will take place, documents the process the evaluation will follow and identifies the outputs the evaluation will produce.

## 2. ABOUT EARLY HELP

### 2.1 The Early Help model

Family Service Providers (FSPs) will deliver, or assist in connecting families to, a range of interventions in the context of a universal setting. Interventions include individualised support, group-based delivery, peer support groups, flexible funding and universally targeted groups. Activities that help to build the capability of universal services staff are also included.

The building of strong relationships between FSPs, schools/universal settings, local health and community services is integral to the implementation and success of Early Help.

For children and families, DFFH have identified the following Early Help outcomes:

- improvements in the quality of parent child interactions
- increased parental confidence and competence to respond positively to parenting challenges
- increased awareness by parents of self-care
- improved participation of children in Maternal and Child Health (MCH), kindergarten, and school
- increased social connection of parents
- increased confidence of universal staff to support families with emerging needs.

### 2.2 The Our Place - Early Help intersect

Early Help model is closely aligned with many aspects of the Our Place approach and shares some consistent outcome themes across the domains of children, family and community.

Both initiatives have a focus on service collaboration that supports wrap-around health and wellbeing for families, better enabling them to benefit from supports available.

In short, both initiatives seek to adopt a place-based, family-centred approach that:

- leads to positive outcomes for individual children and families in the short term
- looks towards a more holistic, integrated response to families in the longer term
- is built upon strong collaborative partnerships.

The following table outlines alignment between the outcomes Our Place aims to achieve and those identified in the DFFH Early Help initiative.

	Children	Families	Communities
<b>Our Place Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children are happy, healthy and develop well (LT)</li> <li>Children achieve as learners (MT)</li> <li>Children engage in learning and social opportunities (ST)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Families are happy, healthy and well with strong self-worth (LT)</li> <li>Families are confident as parents/carers and engage in their children’s learning (MT)</li> <li>Parents engage in learning, are skilled and employed (MT)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community members are connected and feel socially included (MT)</li> <li>Community members have a sense of pride and belonging (LT)</li> <li>Community members actively contribute skills and knowledge to community productivity (LT)</li> </ul>
<b>Early Help Trial – DFFH Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved participation of children in Maternal &amp; Child Health, kindergarten and school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased awareness by parents of self-care</li> <li>Improvements in the quality of parent child interactions</li> <li>Increased parental confidence and competence to respond positively to parenting challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased social connection of parents</li> <li>Increased confidence of universal staff to support families with emerging needs</li> </ul>

### 3. QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE EARLY HELP TRIAL

#### 3.1 Evaluative context

In line with the Our Place commitment to embedded research and evaluation, the Our Place Research and Evaluation team will lead the collection and translation of qualitative and process evaluation data within the Early Help trial at the two Our Place Early Help sites.

Rigorous research and evaluation forms one of the four fundamental pillars of Our Place’s strategy to achieve the Our Place vision and mission. The Our Place vision is that: *All children and families succeed in life*. The ‘Evaluate’ pillar in the Our Place strategy states:

*We measure, research and analyse the impact of our approach to learn and to create evidence for change*

Our Place have developed a comprehensive model for evaluation that encompasses: Process Evaluation (evaluating the fidelity of implementing the Our Place approach), Impact Evaluation (evaluating the effectiveness of the Our Place approach) and Economic Evaluation (evaluating the efficiency of the of Our Place approach).

Evaluative processes and knowledge translation are seen as fundamental to Our Place implementation, enabling evidence-based strategies to achieve outcomes for children, families and communities.

In the context of the broad Roadmap for Reform blueprint, DFFH will lead and support the sharing of linked data and information at strategic and operational levels, and across central and local governance groups. Information sharing will also be a key element for both central and local tracking of progress against key measures (to be determined in a monitoring and evaluation framework developed by DFFH). This will be used to inform next steps and year-on-year implementation planning.<sup>i</sup>

Whilst DFFH will apply an evaluation framework to the wider Roadmap for Reform and it's associated initiatives, Our Place, in consultation with participating family service providers will implement a small-scale qualitative evaluation process applied specifically to the Early Help trial at the Morwell and Northern Bay service sites.

A range of data collection and reporting processes both quantitative and qualitative will occur across Early Help in order to both meet DFFH requirements and those of Our Place as follows:

Data type	Organisation	Guiding document/s	Focus	Leading	*Methods
Quantitative	DFFH	Implementation quantity measures - DFFH Early Help Operational Guidelines and Performance Framework	Service Provision  (Numbers of families engaged, numbers of groups run, practitioner hours etc)	EH Lead Family Service Provider	EHFS Reporting Template  IRIS  Flexible funding acquittal template  Service delivery tracking
Quantitative	Our Place	Our Place Site Process Evaluation Plans  Data Responsibilities Checklist	Process data collection on Service Provision / Utilisation / Satisfaction	Our Place Services Staff with Our Place R&E	Accelerus  Excell Spreadsheets
Qualitative	DFFH / Our Place	Contractual agreements  Our Place Evaluation Framework	Short-term impact on families  Changes within the service system  Implementation barriers and enablers	Our Place R&E	Most Significant Change Interviews  Observation Survey  Cross-site learning  Document review  Quantitative data review

\*For further detail on proposed methods, refer to [Early Help Data Collections Methods EH Staff](#)

## 3.2 Focus

The Our Place-led evaluation will be qualitative in nature and will centre on the capture of stories, the facilitation of learning and reflection opportunities, and the documentation of these.

The aim of this evaluation is to assist in building insight into:

***How the Early Help trial has been implemented in Our Place settings and how has it contributed to outcomes for children and families in Our Place settings.***

The qualitative evaluation will consider both 'process' and (short-term) 'impact'.

### Process

A process lens will be used to explore and understand experiences as they relate to the methods of and conditions for the planning, establishment and implementation of the Early Help trial in each site setting.

- Implementation approach
- What progress the trial is making
- What lessons can inform other service delivery / trial extension

This component of the qualitative evaluation will explore (key evaluation question):

***How the trial has been implemented and the barriers and enablers for effective implementation.***

### Impact

Impact will be considered across two domains: the local service system, and, families.

For Early Help families, short-term impacts will be explored, capturing the experience of families and examples of change centred around parental confidence, parent-child interactions, social connection and awareness of and participation in support services.

This component of the qualitative evaluation will explore (key evaluation question):

***The short-term impacts the trial has had on families in the two Early Help sites***

For the service system, changes relating to collaboration, unified responses, relational-place based responses and family cohorts accessed will be considered.

This component of the qualitative evaluation will explore (key evaluation question):

***The changes that have taken place within the local service system as a result of the trial, that are designed to improve outcomes for families.***

See the [Early Help at Our Place Qualitative Evaluation Framework](#)



### 3.3 Scope and limitations

Whilst short-term impacts for children and families may begin to emerge as the trial evolves, substantive impacts for children and families, in the first year of trial implementation, are unlikely to be seen. To understand the full extent of program influence for children and families, long-term program implementation and evaluation, over an extended period, is required.

Thus, this evaluation does not seek to consider long-term impact or outcomes for children and families, however, will explore possible intended and unintended impacts at the short to medium term level.

As the focus for this evaluation is small in scale and qualitative in nature, evidence arising from the evaluation will not be generalisable across all program participants. Data will be used to highlight key issues, successes and challenges that emerge over the course of the 12-month trial period.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

Early Help is designed to support children and families with emerging needs and vulnerabilities. Children and families who are likely to participate in Early Help interventions may come with experiences of trauma and stigmatisation. Families may have also had negative experiences with the service system, compounding the vulnerabilities they face.

Our Place adheres to a high standard of ethical conduct across all stages of the research and evaluation process. With this in mind, and alongside the context of the children and families participating in Early Help, the qualitative research will be approached with due sensitivity and in accordance with a range of Our Place policies and procedures including:

- Child Safety
- Duty of Care
- Informed Consent
- Cultural Safety
- Data Management Protocols

## 4. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

### 4.1 Evaluation Overview

Objective	Who involved	Method	Outputs	
Development of qualitative data products that demonstrate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the implementation of the Early Help model within an Our Place setting.</li> <li>Progress towards child and family outcomes</li> </ul>	Our Place Staff Family Service Provider Staff and Practitioners School Staff / Representative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Observation</li> <li>Survey</li> <li>MSC</li> <li>Document review</li> <li>Quantitative data review</li> </ul>	MSC Stories Early Help Journey Report Baby College Report	Evaluation Report
	Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Observation</li> <li>Me as a Parent Pre/Post Questionnaire (DFFH tool)</li> <li>Parent Survey – Group Attendance (DFFH tool)</li> </ul>	Family Case Studies	
Facilitation of cross-site learning events to enable lessons and experience between EH sites to be shared and tested	Family Service Providers Our Place Staff	Series of online forums	4 Cross-site Learning & Reflection Sessions Early Help Journey Report	

## 4.2 Timeline Overview

	Term 3 2022	Term 4 2022	Term 1 2023	Term 2 2023
<b>Phase 1: Planning and evaluation development</b>	Qualitative Evaluation Plan Qualitative Evaluation Framework Data collection tools Cross-site Learning & Reflection Session 1 Evaluation / Learning Updates			
<b>Phase 2: Data collection and sharing</b>		Most Significant Change Stories Cross-site Learning & Reflection Session 2 Evaluation / Learning Updates	Most Significant Change Stories Family Case Studies Cross-site Learning & Reflection Session 3 Evaluation / Learning Updates	
<b>Phase 3: Data analysis</b>				Collated Most Significant Change Stories
<b>Phase 4: Final reporting</b>				Collated Family Case Studies Journey Report Qualitative Evaluation Report Baby College Report Cross-site Learning & Reflection Session 4

Further timeline detail can be found in the [Early Help Qualitative Evaluation Workplan](#).

### 4.3 Roles

Family Service Providers will be responsible for the collection of and reporting on service provision data as set out by DFFH in the *Early Help Operational Guidelines and Performance Framework*. This data will be used to monitor performance against Early Help targets and to contribute to the DFFH led program evaluation.

Our Place will attend to the collection of stories and sentiment, whilst documenting the Early Help trial journey across both sites. Our Place will also facilitate cross-site learning opportunities between the two Early Help Our Place sites – Morwell and Northern Bay, and collect quantitative data as part of ongoing Our Place practice.

Stakeholder	Role	Lead	Contributors
Family Service Provider agency	Quantitative data collection on service provision as per <i>Early Help Operational Guidelines and Performance Framework</i> to monitor performance against targets  Sharing of deidentified data with Our Place.	Lead Family Service Provider staff / practitioners	Our Place Community Facilitators
Our Place	Our Place process (quantitative) data collection on service provision and uptake.  Standard Our Place annual survey implementation, including Partnership Survey and Services Survey.	R&E Team	Community Facilitators
Our Place	Qualitative data collection (e.g. MSC stories, interviews, workshops, observation) on family and service provider experience.  Identification of families who may be suitable to participate in the evaluation.  Facilitation of and reporting on cross-site learning and reflection sessions	Qualitative Researcher	Community Facilitators  Family Service Providers

#### The role of the Research and Evaluation (R&E) team

The Our Place R&E team will work with Partnership Managers, Community Facilitators, Early Help Family Service Providers and other relevant stakeholders to coordinate qualitative data collection.

The R&E team will:

- Introduce the qualitative evaluation work with Early Help Family Service Providers
- Share and consult on evaluation plans
- Lead qualitative data collection with participating Family Service Provider
- Facilitate reflection and learning activities with participating Family Service Providers
- Liaise with Family Service Providers to identify and invite suitable families to participate in the evaluation

- Support the establishment of data collection processes, with consideration to both the requirements of DFFH and those of Our Place
- Follow ethical protocols that ensures the safety, privacy and respect of all participants
- Provide updates on the evaluation to DFFH and Family Service Providers
- Produce qualitative evaluation products

#### The role of Participating Family Service Providers in the Qualitative Evaluation

- Participate in reflection discussions, interviews and other data collection processes led by Our Place
- Assist in the identification of families who may be suitable to participate in the evaluation
- Where suitable and appropriate, share deidentified quantitative and qualitative data with Our Place
- Discuss any queries or concerns about the qualitative evaluation with Our Place

Further detail can be found in [Scope of Work Early Help and Baby College](#)

#### 4.4 Risks

Risk	Mitigation / Response
COVID-19 impacts / interrupts the implementation of Early Help activities and consequently the qualitative evaluation	Shift to online environment where possible / appropriate.
Families do not elect to participate in evaluation activities	<p>Our Place will work closely with Family Service Providers in the identification of families who may be willing to participate.</p> <p>Due time will be spent with interested families to assist them in understanding the interview process, including options to withdraw and privacy protocols.</p> <p>Adherence to a high standard of ethical practice in line with Our Place policies and procedures.</p> <p>Participation supports offered to families including the potential for childcare during the interview and for translator support.</p>
Family violence / child safety disclosure during interview	<p>Child Safe Policies and Procedures in place and utilised.</p> <p>Duty of care process in place.</p>
Families experience survey fatigue	<p>Data collection processes moderated by lead EH Family Service Provider and Project Advisory Groups.</p> <p>Families notified of right to opt in or opt out of data collection.</p>



## 5. ITERATIVE DATA SHARING

Throughout the evaluation, emergent data will be shared with key stakeholders as part of ongoing feedback cycles.

This will include recurrent evaluation updates at Early Help governance group meetings, regular reporting to DFFH and the sharing of Early Help stories (Most Significant Change stories / Family Case Studies) as they emerge.

Evaluation updates and emergent data will be shared:

- As part of monthly Early Help Implementation Reports to DFFH, including summary reports from Cross-Site Learning and Reflection Sessions.
- At monthly Early Help site governance group meetings (Project Advisory Groups – PAGs)
- As part of Our Place Early Help (cross-site) Coordination Meetings

## 6. OUTPUTS

Outputs from the evaluation will be used in building the evidence base for what works, for who and how, in the delivery of the Early Help initiative with Our Place settings.

1.	<a href="#">Early Help Journey Report</a>	The Early Help Journey Report will tell the story of Early Help implementation at the Morwell and Northern Bay sites. The Early Help Journey Report will document the process for establishing and implementing Early Help at each site including governance structures, Early Help interventions / activities, and family engagement. Successes will be highlighted alongside challenges faced and how these were overcome.
2.	<a href="#">Family Case Studies</a>	A collection of Family Case Studies will be developed, providing a window of insight into the experiences of those participating in Early Help activities. Family Case studies will capture and share any short-term impacts of their participation both intended and unintended, and give voice to the families of the Early Help community at Our Place sites.
3.	<a href="#">Most Significant Change (MSC) Stories</a>	A suite of MSC Stories from Early Help program staff and practitioners will showcase examples of meaningful change taking place within the Early Help initiative. MSC stories may pertain to stories of change for both staff working with Early Help or for family participants.
4.	<a href="#">Baby College Report</a>	A program monitoring report.

5.	<a href="#">Qualitative Evaluation Report</a>	A short evaluation report will be produced, documenting the evaluation process, findings and key learnings of the Early Help at Our Place trial.
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## 7. FURTHER INFORMATION

For any other questions or queries, please contact Kate Baker (Qualitative Researcher, Our Place) at [kate.baker@ourplace.org.au](mailto:kate.baker@ourplace.org.au)

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<sup>i</sup> Roadmap for Reform: pathways to support children and families. Priority setting plan 2021 – 24.

## Our Place Early Help Qualitative Evaluation Framework

<b>Our Place Vision</b>	<b>Children and their families succeed in life</b>									
<b>Outcome areas</b>	<b>Children</b>			<b>Families</b>			<b>Community</b>			
<b>Early Help Outcomes</b>	<b>DFFH</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved participation of children in Maternal &amp; Child Health, kindergarten and school</li> </ul>			<b>DFFH</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased awareness by parents of self-care</li> <li>Improvements in the quality of parent child interactions</li> <li>Increased parental confidence and competence to respond positively to parenting challenges</li> </ul>			<b>DFFH</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased social connection of parents</li> <li>Increased confidence of universal staff to support families with emerging needs</li> </ul>			
<b>Strategies</b>	The Our Place Approach	Individual Support (Brief Intervention)	Group-based Delivery	Peer Support Groups	Universally Targeted Groups	Flexible Funding	Capability Building			
<b>Example Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single entrance</li> <li>Long-term presence</li> <li>Stakeholder liaison / relationship building</li> <li>Place-based focus</li> <li>Active, relational, trust-based community engagement / referral</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family Service Practitioners on site for drop-in / case management support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wonderkind Play Therapy</li> <li>Bringing Up Great Kids</li> <li>Circle of Security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Men's Group</li> <li>Connect UP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Baby College</li> <li>Targeted play groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Material Aid</li> <li>Funded access to other supports, recreation, sport, social activities, e.g. Wonderkind Play Therapy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information sessions at SPGs</li> <li>Liaison with education / support practitioners on site.</li> <li>Staff meetings</li> </ul>			
<b>Key Evaluation Question</b>	<i>How has the Early Help Trial been implemented in Our Place settings and how has it contributed to outcomes for children and families?</i>									
<b>Impact Evaluation Questions</b>	<b>Families</b>		<i>What (short-term) impact has the trial had on families in the two Early Help sites?</i>							
			Parental confidence	Parent-child interactions	Social / community connection			Awareness of and participation in supports and services		
	<b>Local Service System</b>		<i>What changes have taken place within the local service system as a result of the trial, that are designed to improve outcomes for families?</i>							
			Accessing those not engaged in the service system	Local, place-based, family-centred response	Relationships and collaboration	A cohesive response to families				
<b>Process Evaluation Questions</b>	<i>How has the trial been implemented and what have been the barriers and enablers to effective implementation?</i>									
	Implementation approach			Effectiveness of infrastructure/resources to enable and facilitate impact, including collaborative governance				Barriers and enablers		
<b>Methods</b>	Interviews	Observation	Most Significant Change	Cross-site learning	Surveys	Parenting Questionnaire Review	Document Review	Quantitative Data Review		
<b>Outputs</b>	Family Case Studies		Most Significant Change Stories		Early Help Journey Report		Qualitative Evaluation Report		Baby College Report	

## Appendix C – Early Help at Our Place Evaluation Report

### Early Help at Our Place Trial Site Profiles

The following overview summarises the two Early Help at Our Place trial settings, including an outline of Our Place and the communities in which the trial sites have been located.

#### Inner Gippsland: Our Place Morwell

##### The Morwell community

Morwell is a town in the Latrobe Valley area of Gippsland, in South-Eastern Victoria, approximately 150km east of Melbourne's Central Business District. It has a population of 14,432 people<sup>1</sup>. Morwell is located in the centre of the Latrobe Valley urban area and is part of the Latrobe City Council.

Morwell is a town known for energy production, coal mining and fossil-fuel power generation however when the restructuring and privatisation of the State Electricity Commission occurred in the 1990's many jobs were lost. This has a detrimental impact on Morwell's business district and the community as a whole.

Today Morwell has education facilities from preschool through to vocational education and training. Morwell is the headquarters of the Central Gippsland Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Gippsland's Federation University Australia campus is located in the adjacent town of Churchill. The town has four primary schools. In addition to Morwell Central Primary School and Morwell Park Primary School there are two Catholic schools: St Vincent De Paul Primary and Sacred Heart Primary. There is also a secondary school, Kurnai College Morwell Campus.

The most common occupations in Morwell are technicians and trades (16.1%), labourers (15.2%), clerical and administrative workers (13.1%), followed by community and personal service workers and sales<sup>2</sup>. The most common industries are supermarkets and grocery stores, fossil fuel electricity generation, takeaway food services and aged care residential services.

Morwell is a mostly Australian-born, English-speaking community. Most residents were born in Australia (72%), with 55% of people having both parents born in Australia<sup>3</sup>. The most common ancestries in Morwell were English 36%, Australian 34%, Scottish 9%, Irish 8% and Italian 7%.

Education completion rates amongst Morwell residents are low. Only 12% have completed Year 12 as their highest level of educational attainment, while 20% had completed a Certificate III or IV, and 6% had completed an Advanced Diploma or Diploma<sup>4</sup>. Some 1,706 residents aged 15 and above reported only having reached Year 9 or below, with a further 93 having no education attainment at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Community Profile

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/communityprofiles?opendocument&navpos=230>

<sup>2</sup> Most recent data available at the time of writing – ABS, 2016 <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/SED25402>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Community Profile

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/communityprofiles?opendocument&navpos=230>

<sup>4</sup> Most recent data available at the time of writing – ABS, 2016 <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/SED25402>

A total of 395 students attended Morwell Central Primary School in 2021, and 397 attended Morwell Park Primary School.

Many children in Morwell are developmentally vulnerable. Morwell community AEDC data from 2021 indicates that 48% of children were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, compared to 20% for Victoria, and 38% were developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, compared to 10% for Victoria<sup>5</sup>.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score for Morwell Central Primary School was 907 in 2021 compared to a median score of 1,000, and 909 in Morwell Park Primary School<sup>6</sup>. Lower ICSEA scores, and less than the median of 1,000, reflects a community that has higher proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The proportion of children who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander was 11% in Morwell Central Primary School and 14% in Morwell Park Primary School, while the proportion who have a language background other than English was 12% in Morwell Central and 11% in Morwell Park<sup>7</sup>.

Data indicates that families in the Morwell community experience high levels of family violence, out of home care, child protection notifications and families living in public housing. While not a large population, it is a growth area due to the movement of new residents to public housing available in the town. COVID-19 has had economic impact on the already vulnerable local economy with many shops closing during pandemic restrictions.

## Our Place Morwell

The Our Place Morwell site is comprised of two schools: Morwell Central Primary School and Morwell Park Primary School. The schools are located in close proximity to one another, and both cater for children in Prep to Year 6, with approximately 380 students enrolled in each<sup>8</sup>.

While the two schools collectively make up the Morwell Our Place site, the majority of Early Help activity in Morwell took place at Morwell Central Primary. At the commencement of the Early Help trial, building redevelopment at Morwell Park Primary School was still in progress and it was not until January 2023 that Morwell Park become an active part of Our Place Morwell. By this stage Early Help had been operating at the Morwell Central Primary School site for a number of months.

Our Place at Morwell Central Primary School became operational in January 2020 following completion of the school redevelopment, which includes an onsite early learning centre and adjoining community space and consultation rooms. It is one of ten Our Place sites to be established modelled on the demonstration site at Doveton College in 2012.

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2021.

<sup>6</sup> SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage, 2016

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2033.0.55.001~2016~Main%20Features~IRS D~19>

<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021, Community Profile

<https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/communityprofiles?opendocument&navpos=230>

<sup>8</sup> myschool website <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/52470>

Morwell's journey towards becoming an Our Place site commenced in 2016 when a merger of three local schools took place and Latrobe City Council were encouraging new schools to be designed as community hubs. Following the school merger, a new school – Morwell Central Primary School – was established in 2017. This coincided with the establishment of Our Place to lead the expansion of the Doveton College model to other communities. In that same year an initial meeting between the school Principals from Morwell Central and Morwell Park Primary Schools and the Colman Education Foundation Chair took place to discuss the potential for a Morwell Our Place site across both schools.

Morwell Our Place offers a single shared entry, early learning services, Our Place office, a multipurpose community room and consulting rooms offering health and allied health supports such as visiting Maternal and Child Health, National Disability Insurance Scheme, Speech Pathologist and General Practice. A small-scale food pantry, learning games library and parent lounge space is also available. A range of family engagement opportunities are delivered alongside parenting support and education programs.

Further detail on the establishment of Morwell Our Place can be viewed in the [Morwell Our Place Journey Report](#).

## Barwon: Our Place Northern Bay

### The Northern Bay community

Corio, Northern Bay is a suburb of Geelong situated 10km from Geelong's city centre and 70km south-west of Melbourne.

Corio is an area that has experienced long-term, significant disadvantage with the current median family income per week 37% less than the average for Victoria and high levels of unemployment (21% in Corio vs the state average of 9% of couple families with children, and 6% in Corio vs 4% across Victoria for single parents with children)<sup>9</sup>.

The most common occupations in Northern Bay are in healthcare and social assistance (13.4%), retail trade (12%) and manufacturing (11.3%). The most common industries are supermarkets and grocery stores, fossil fuel electricity generation, takeaway food services and aged care residential services<sup>10</sup>.

As well as many families experiencing high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, many experience additional vulnerabilities such as mental health conditions (18% of adults aged 25 – 44, 7% above the state average), family violence (1685 reported incidents between 2021 – 2022, 36% of which affected children) and developmental delays in children (26% of children in Corio's SA2 are developmentally delayed in two or more AEDC domains and 18% of children in their first year of school are reported to have difficulties with speech and / or language)<sup>11</sup>.

The population of Corio is diverse with a significant proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander residents, as well as a high number who have recently arrived from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly from Southeast Asia and Myanmar (formerly Burma).

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<sup>9</sup> Corio Community Data - Our Place Community Profile

<sup>10</sup> Corio Community Data – Our Place Community Profile

<sup>11</sup> Corio Community Data – Our Place Community Profile



## Our Place Northern Bay

Our Place Northern Bay is located at Northern Bay College's Wexford Campus in the Geelong suburb of Corio. The Wexford campus caters for children in Prep to Year 8 and is one of five College campuses located in the 3214 (Geelong region) postcode.

Our Place Northern Bay became operational in January 2020 with the completion of the City of Greater Geelong's Korayn Birralelee Family Centre on the Wexford site, and the construction of the school's new administrative offices and reception area connected to the new Centre, which jointly make up the Our Place Northern Bay site. 'Korayn Birralelee' means 'Corio children' in the local Wathawurrung language, a name chosen to recognise and celebrate the region's Aboriginal heritage.

Northern Bay's journey towards being an Our Place site commenced back in 2013 when the College Principal visited Doveton College, followed by a meeting with the Chair of the Colman Education Foundation, at his quest to provide an optimal school experience to his students and break the cycle of disadvantage. Prior to this, a long-standing commitment to building integrated child and family centres existed within City of Greater Geelong, alongside a number of government initiatives undertaken in the Corio/Norlane area to improve child and family outcomes, including a long-running Best Start partnership.

The Centre features the latest in early childhood facilities and environmental design. It includes a shared entry and reception with Northern Bay College and offers long day care, kindergarten, Maternal and Child Health (MCH), playgroups, parenting programs, five consultation rooms for allied health services, a specialist family support program room, toy library, multipurpose/community room, parent lounge and an extensive, nature-inspired outdoor play area.

For further background on Northern Bay's establishment as an Our Place site, refer to the [\*Northern Bay Our Place Journey Report\*](#) .

## Appendix D – Early Help at Our Place Evaluation Report

### Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using a variety of tools and methods throughout the course of the trial. Qualitative methods included observations and site visits, staff interviews, parent interviews, document analysis and reflection sessions and tools (cross-site learning and reflection sessions, staff reflection tool, 'rapid reflection' tool), as well as the Most Significant Change technique. In addition, a review of quantitative data took place, focusing on attendance and participation data as well as survey data where available.

These methods are outlined in further detail below, including copies of interview schedules, consent forms and the reflection tool.

#### Observation

Including site visits, participation in governance and operational meetings, participation in Early Help group activities (such as Baby College, Playgroup, Connect Up, After-school Cooking, After-school Games, Bums to Bubs) and informal discussion with parents and staff.

#### Cross-site Learning and Reflection sessions

Cross-site learning events were held on a quarterly basis throughout the trial to share lessons and learning. These sessions brought together senior staff from the Early Help family service providers and Our Place staff. Sessions were designed for relationship building, information exchange, reflection, sharing of stories and for data collection.

Sessions included:

- Implementation updates
- Successes achieved and challenges faced
- Evaluation updates, feedback loops and sense-checking
- Case studies and stories
- Future planning

Following each of the four Cross-site Learning and Reflection sessions, participant surveys were conducted to gather feedback and for future session planning.

#### Staff reflection tool

An online staff reflection tool was developed for Early Help practitioners to record activities and reflections throughout trial implementation. The tool was designed to be easily accessible for practitioners to complete individually or in small groups. A flexible approach to frequency of use was taken with the option to complete on weekly or fortnightly basis, allowing for adaptation to practitioner workloads.

The staff reflection tool sought to capture key activities taking place, key challenges and success stories.

This tool was used by the Early Help Morwell team, however the decision was made for this not to be implemented in Northern Bay due to limited practitioner capacity.

## Rapid reflection sessions

Rapid reflection sessions were held at both Early Help sites, enabling group reflection on specific lines of enquiry emerging through the evaluation. The Rapid reflections comprised 10 – 15 minute brainstorm sessions, held during Early Help Project Advisory Group meetings. Rapid reflection questions included:

- Is Early Help creating better alignment between services? If so, in what ways?
- Is there anything you would do differently during the establishment phase?
- Is Early Help at Our Place enabling family service providers to access different families (earlier in need)? If so, in what ways? If not, what would support this to occur?
- Is Early Help enabling practice change around family engagement and support? If so, in what ways? If not, what would support this?
- What does early intervention look like on a universal platform? What have we learnt?

## Staff interviews

Interviews with family service provider and Our Place staff predominantly took place towards the end of the trial, however a small number of initial interviews with Our Place staff were also held at the start of the trial.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and online and were recorded for note taking purposes.

A copy of the staff interview schedule can be found below.

## Parent interviews

Consent was obtained from parents prior to interviews. Priority was given to conduct parent interviews face-to-face where possible, however some parent interviews took place via phone. All interviews were recorded, with permission, for note taking purposes. Participation in interviews was always voluntary with the option to opt out at any time, provided.

Parents for interview were sought from across the spectrum of Early Help interventions and a trauma-informed lens was applied to interview conduct.

A copy of the parent interview consent form and interview schedule can be found below.

## Most Significant Change

Most Significant Change (MSC) stories were developed using a simplified MSC approach that suited the evaluation context. This involved the Our Place Qualitative Researcher working with individuals to identify and document examples of change.

These stories can be found in Appendix E of the Early Help at Our Place Evaluation Report.

## Document analysis

Document review included:

- State Government documentation (policy, guidelines, frameworks)
- Parenting questionnaires
- Governance documents
- Meeting minutes
- Planning documents
- Scoping documents
- Reports

## Quantitative data

Whilst the collection and analysis of quantitative data does not fall within the scope of this evaluation a brief review of the available quantitative data was undertaken.

It should be noted that the quantitative data available was limited and that there were significant variations in the quality.

The qualitative data review did however include data provided from Early Help family service providers, data collected by Our Place and data provided by the Department of Families Fairness and Housing.

# Early Help at Our Place Evaluation

## Staff interviews

### Questions

	Question
All	1. <b>Background</b> – what is your background and area of work/interest?
All	2. <b>Experiences</b> of working with Early Help at Our Place – what role do you play and how you came to be there?
Senior Staff	3. <b>Timeline</b> - how did it all start?
All	4. <b>Partnership</b> – EH has required FSPs, OP and the school to work in close collaboration. How would you describe what this has been like? What has supported this? Have there been any barriers?
All	5. <b>Partnership</b> - What have each of the key stakeholders (FSP, School, OP) brought to EH?
All	6. <b>Building and infrastructure</b> –what has it been like to have EH based at the OP site building?
Senior staff	7. In what ways has EH at Our <b>Place driven a different approach to service delivery</b> ? What does this difference look like?
Senior staff	8. How has the process of recruiting and employing <b>EH staff</b> gone?
Senior staff	9. What sorts of <b>skills, expertise, experience support</b> EH practitioners in their roles?
Practitioners	10. How were families engaged? EH represents a <b>new way of working</b> with families, through proactive warm engagement with families, greater emphasis on family centred and place-based approaches. What has been the experience for staff to work in this way? How have they gone about this?
Practitioners	11. What are the <b>demographics</b> of the current participants? What are the key challenges they are facing?

# Early Help at Our Place Evaluation

## Parent / Carer Interviews

### Questions

1. Could you share a little about yourself and your family?
2. Can you tell us the story of how you came to be involved in X?
3. What drew you joining X?
4. Do you remember what your impression was of X at the start? How did it feel?
5. Have you encountered any unexpected surprises in joining X? These might be about yourself or about the group.
6. What has kept you coming back to X? What did you like best?
7. Has your involvement with X led to any particular connections with new people or other programs or services? Could you tell me about these? Do you think they will continue?
8. Have you faced any challenges in participating in X? What has helped you get through these challenges?
9. Thinking about yourself prior to joining X and now, has anything changed for you, your children or your family as a whole? What has been the biggest / most significant change?
  - a. Do you see, feel or do things differently?
  - b. How do you feel about that change?
10. What would you tell others who were interested in joining the group?
11. Is there anything that you would like to see done differently with X or that you think could be improved upon?
12. What are your hopes for the future – for you and your children?



## INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Parent/Carers

Our Place works together with a range of community and health organisations to offer a range of services and programs for children and families on site. As a family who has attended, or is currently using these services or programs, you have been invited to participate in an interview to share your experiences.

Please refer to the *Parent / Carer Interview Information Sheet* and / or an Our Place staff member for further information about the interview process.

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### Agreement

I have been invited to take part in this project, which is being undertaken by the Our Place Research and Evaluation team and understand the information that has been provided to me about the interview process.

I understand that researchers will conduct an interview with me to learn about my experiences in programs and supports at the Our Place site and that stories from interviews may be written up and shared. I understand that Our Place will consult with me to ensure that written stories accurately and safely reflect my experiences and do not contain any personal information that may identify me or my family.

I understand that I have the right to change my mind about my involvement or my information being used at any point, including after an interview has taken place. I also understand that if stories have appeared in printed or published documents before the date that I share that I have changed my mind, Our Place may continue to use those stories.

I consent to:

- Participating in up to two audio-recorded interviews with an Our Place researcher
- Having my contact details kept on file and being contacted again in the future for a second interview
- The use of my data in ways that do not personally identify me or my family such as in reports, presentations or on the Our Place website
- Having my data used in future research projects or report on Our Place programs.

Name of parent/carer:

Email address:

Phone number:

Parent/community member signature:

Date:

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**Our Place's Child Safety Policy and Privacy Policy are available at [www.ourplace.org.au](http://www.ourplace.org.au) These policies contain information about how your personal information will be stored, how you can access or correct it and how you may complain about a breach of your privacy.**

## Early Help at Our Place Staff Online Reflection Tool

### Reflection questions

1. Please note your role in the Early Help team
2. What 3 key Early Help tasks/activities have you focussed on over the past few weeks? For example, these might include tasks/activities such as 'planning for a new playgroup' or 'school absenteeism working group' or 'providing individual brief intervention support with parents' or 'working to address limited uptake of x service'.
3. Overall, what have been some of the positive aspects of the program / implementation that you have noticed over the past few weeks? Can you provide any specific examples? These could relate to how EH is being implemented, the impact EH is having on the local service system, or the impact you are seeing for families.
4. Over the past few weeks, what, if any, challenges have you, or your EH team encountered? Can you provide any specific examples? As above, these might relate to how EH is being implemented, the impact EH is having on the local service system or the impact you are seeing for families.
5. If you have any other general comments, thoughts, ideas, wonderings or ponderings about Early Help, feel free to note them here.
6. Sharing your name is optional, however it would be helpful for us to be able to follow up with you for any clarification needed, to learn more about what you have shared or to explore the creation of a Most Significant Change story. If you are comfortable to do so, you can note your name here.

## Early Help Case Study

Early Help is a trial initiative bringing together community support agencies with universal services to support families with emerging needs. Led by the Department of Families Fairness and Housing, Early Help is embedded at two Our Place sites providing a unique platform for family engagement. Throughout the Trial, Our Place is undertaking a qualitative evaluation to understand the experiences of Early Help services and families.

### Families Now at the Centre for Early Help Practitioner

Having been a Kindergarten Teacher for more than 20 years, \*Belinda, now an Early Help Practitioner at Northern Bay, deeply values the opportunity she currently has to connect with parents in ways she always wished she could.

At the time Belinda saw the Early Help Practitioner role advertised with Bethany Family Support services, she had been considering a move out of her early years teaching role into studying Family or Child Play Therapy. She had reached a point where she was looking for new ways to use the highly attuned family engagement skills she had developed throughout her career. The Early Help Practitioner role looked to be exactly what Belinda was seeking - a synchronistic match to her skills, experience, passion and values.

Belinda reflects on her time as a Kindergarten Teacher and the limitations of the role. "I could never really connect with the parents, due to the duty of care with the children in the room and the vast amount of program planning and administration in the teaching role. It would only ever be these quick, short chats [with the parents]. The primary focus had to be on the kids and even if I sensed something might have been up with a parent, I rarely could spend any time with them to follow up."

Now in Early Help, her remit is to connect with parents in the ways she always wished she could as a Kindergarten Teacher. "That part of my role was really important to me, but I was in a spin, with not enough time to do it. Now I have so much more time and headspace and I'm being encouraged to talk to people, to walk around and connect with people".

At the Our Place site, Belinda jointly leads two of the Early Help Supported Playgroups, and is one of the onsite Early Help practitioners providing individual support (brief intervention) to families.

She's using her skills to connect with parents in ways that are attuned to their needs, that create a sense of safety and connection. From this base of support, parents are engaging in new activities, building upon and expanding their social connections, and beginning to share more about the challenges they face. "This opens up a space to make some gentle suggestions about relevant help that is available, such as family counselling for example", says Belinda, enabling parents to connect with supports through relationships based on trust and respect and an understanding of the type of help that may ultimately make a difference for that particular family.

Over coming months, Belinda is looking forward to engaging with more families and learning about more of the services on offer to help them. "It's rewarding knowing we can make a difference in children's lives when coming to work each day".

\* Name has been changed.

## INSIGHTS

This story highlights how Early Help is uniquely positioned to draw upon practitioner skills and expertise in family engagement. It demonstrates how the Early Help practitioner role enables pathways of support for families that are not always afforded by other roles in the Early Childhood sector.

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### JUST ACROSS THE CORRIDOR

The Our Place office sits opposite the Maternal Child Health (MCH) consulting rooms, with the early childhood centre a little further down the corridor. Here the Our Place staff have daily chats with passing families, the MCH nurses and early childhood workers.

Recently an MCH nurse popped over for a quick chat with an Our Place Community Facilitator - Julie\*, a local mum, and her 4-month-old were here for a regular checkup and might benefit from other supports at the integrated Our Place site.

With Julie's permission, the nurse brought Julie across the corridor, introducing her to the Our Place Community Facilitator. Having a sense of Julie's situation, gained prior from the nurse, the Our Place Community Facilitator chatted with Julie about Story Time - a casual, fun, weekly and free, drop-in story session for families.

Julie found the courage to come along to Story Time with her little boy, and here she chatted with the Our Place team about the other programs available at Our Place, including the Early Help playgroup that was currently in action, just across the corridor.

As Story Time finished, the Our Place staff member brought Julie over to the playgroup. Here they met the Early Help Playgroup Facilitator who warmly welcomed Julie. Having worked with families for many years, she could quickly see Julie's hesitation and nerves, and so spoke about the safe and friendly nature of playgroup. Julie now opened up about her social anxiety and how it prevented her involvement in much of life outside home.

Over the weeks, however, through the gentle support of an attentive Early Help Practitioner, Julie became increasingly comfortable at playgroup. She has begun to open up about some of the other challenges she faces, allowing the Early Help Practitioner the chance to share information about other supports such as family counselling.

Soon Julie was enquiring about joining a different playgroup, one with older children more suited to the age of her son. They are now regulars at this playgroup and Julie has become friendly with a few of the other mums.

\*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and their families

## INSIGHTS

This story highlights how Early Help at Our Place can support **local, place-based, family-centred responses**. Through the co-location and **integration of services onsite, response to family need can be more cohesive**. **Warm referrals create safe pathways** for **early parent engagement** and support, contributing to increased **social connection, parental confidence, awareness of and participation in supports and services**.

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### MOTHER OF EIGHT

It was a cold and wet Monday morning when the Our Place Partnership Manager, arriving to the Our Place carpark for work, noticed a mother, Tracey\*, with more than her hands full. Struggling to balance two babies in her arms along with backpacks hooked around her neck they were heading into day care. Offering to help, the Partnership Manager chatted with the mother as they headed for the early learning centre. The Partnership Manager was then there with Tracey when told there had been a misunderstanding. The two babies had not been booked in as Tracey had expected. Noting Tracey's distress, the Partnership Manager offered a coffee and a chat.

Over a hot drink, the extent of Tracey's hardship quickly came to light. Caring for eight children, five in nappies and four a part of a Kinship Care arrangement, Tracey was facing roadblocks in the system (services and agencies had been unresponsive to her calls), leaving her with no support at all. She had been told the two children, through Kinship Care, were booked for care that day. She was then expecting to attend a class for the diploma course she was trying to complete.

Upon hearing what Tracey was facing, the Our Place Partnership Manager brought Tracey into the Early Help Practitioner who is collocated in the office next door, providing individual support for families. Together with Tracey they created a plan and jumped into action.

Through persistence, perseverance and overcoming roadblocks (such as the mislabelling of Tracey as ineligible for support), the Early Help Practitioner worked with Tracey's Child Protection Case Manager for the Centrelink payments to which Tracey was entitled but had not been receiving. They were also able to arrange for a local family support service to provide Tracey with additional, one-off financial support and a delivery of nappies by the end of the day. Referrals were made for respite care and the Early Help Practitioner is continuing to assist Tracey in accessing other services, such as First Supports for her Kinship Care needs. Tracey is also now a regular attendee at Early Help Supported Playgroups.

With some of Tracey's more immediate needs met, the Early Help Practitioner has turned their attentions to securing longer-term care coordination to ensure ongoing support. Highly vulnerable to the prospect of family separation, Early Help and Our Place have played an essential role in finding pathways to the support Tracey urgently needed.

\*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and their families

### INSIGHTS

This story shows that by informally reaching out to parents, in universal settings, families who are at risk and **falling through service gaps** can receive the support they need. It demonstrates barriers that families face in accessing service system support and the role that Our Place and Early Help, working together, can play to overcome these. Having Early Help at Our Place has enabled a timely, **family-centred response** for this family, alongside a **pathway to a longer term and more cohesive experience of care** – all significant protective factors for keeping families united.

## Early Help Case Study

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### Returning to work

A mum with a young baby began attending Baby College as she was isolated with little to no family, friends, or support. Mum expressed her anxiety about caring for a new baby because she was a first-time mum with no one to whom she could ask questions. The mum was anxious and apprehensive of services due to her negative experience with a service when her newborn baby was very unwell in hospital. Mum was also apprehensive about returning to work and placing her son in care, however stated financially she needed to return to work full time after 6 months.

Through regular attendance, parent education, support and connection at Baby College, the mum has begun to build on her parenting skills, built friendships with other mums attending Baby College and built trust with the Baby College Facilitators. Baby College facilitators were able to support the mum to explore and enrol her son in the Childcare at the site where Baby Collage is facilitated. Mum started her son at Childcare and returned to work full time.

Once mum had returned to work fulltime, she negotiated with her workplace to still attend Baby College as she stated this was very important for her son and her own wellbeing. The mum has the confidence to pick her son up from childcare, which is on site where Baby College runs, brings him to Baby College and then takes him back to childcare.

Through the trust built with Baby College Facilitators, the mum feels able to ask for support when needed.

Mum and baby have made connections with services in the community such as childcare and attending the 'Baby Rhyme Time' at the library.

Mum has also built a support network with Childcare, Baby College facilitators and other mums at Baby College.

## INSIGHTS

This story provides an example of how Early Help supports, through the provision of the Baby College program, can support families to remain engaged with services, to take the steps they need to remain financially independent and to build supportive social connections. By co-locating and integrating services and programs - in this case the Early Learning Centre alongside Baby College at the Our Place site, a safe and trusting environment can be created, easing participation for families in multiple supports, building parental confidence and as seen in this case, supporting their economic participation.



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### THE WHOLE FAMILY

With a husband grappling significant health and pain management issues, both physical and psychological, Hayma\* does most of the parenting for their two young boys. She's a confident mum with good parenting skills, but she shares with the Early Help staff just how hard it is to do it all on her own. When asked if she had anyone who could come to help out, Hayma shared that her family and friends were all in her home country, highlighting her isolation here in Australia.

Daivika, her 4-year-old had been attending Kinder at the Our Place site for a short while and on one occasion, Hayma got chatting to an Our Place Community Facilitator. Together they went for a tour of the onsite early learning centre, primary school, health facilities and community spaces. Seeing that Hayma was also parenting a 2-year-old, Denpa, the Community Facilitator introduced Hayma to the Early Help Practitioner running playgroups on site.

Soon after, and despite the challenges of English as a second language, Hayma became a regular at one of the Our Place Early Help playgroups. Here she shared how much she missed her family and home and the impact of her loneliness.

After a short time, however, playgroup became a positive sense of connection for Hayma and it wasn't long before she enquired about other activities at the Our Place site. Soon after, she and her husband, Nyein, had signed up for the Early Help Circle of Security parent support program and then from there Nyein went on to join the Bringing Up Great Kids parenting education program, another of the group activities offered through Early Help.

Now, both parents, Hayma and Nyein along with Denpa, are regulars at two playgroups each week – Mum attending one session and Dad attending another. They know most of the staff, many other families. Hayma giggles when she shares with the Early Help Practitioner that she and her husband want to join all the groups on offer.

The Early Help Practitioner running the playgroups, who now knows Hayma well, reflects on the change she's witnessed across the family. "They are now connected to a community, they have a sense of belonging. It's extended to her partner and I can see she's made some friends who she's spending a lot of time with. If they need help along the way, they've got somewhere to come".

\*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and their families

## INSIGHTS

Having Early Help at Our Place has meant that this isolated mother of two and, consequently, her husband have both significantly expanded their **social connections**, sense of community and belonging. The story highlights the value of having a **range of services under one roof in a universal setting**, the **power of warm referral** and **the role of Our Place in linking families to Early Help** activities. As a vulnerable family at risk of decline, Early Help at Our Place has engaged this family with emerging needs, enabling **family access to a range of supports and services**.

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### WHITEBOARDS AND PIZZA

Armed with a whiteboard on wheels and a box of fruit, the Our Place staff set out to connect with children and families on their way out at school pickup time. "If you could have any after-school activity happening here, what would it be?". As children reached for a pear or apple they shared their ideas. Cooking and games rated high and before long the Our Place and an Early Help Practitioner were making healthy pizzas with 12 families after school.

In an Early Help meeting onsite, the Our Place Partnership Manager notes "We need to look at different ways to reach our target groups, creative ways to access different, new families, using a multipronged approach, not just one size fits all. We need to go to the families and hear what they want." And for mother of three, Jade, this approach has led to help she was very much needing.

Back at the cooking group, with pizzas in the oven, and the children making towers with plastic cups in the corner, the parents were chatting both amongst themselves and with the Our Place and Early Help workers. Jade was talking with the Our Place Partnership Manager who mentioned the GP service onsite, that Jade had heard of but knew little about. Jade learned that the GP was available 2 days per week and was there specifically for families at the school.

As the cooking session wrapped up, the Partnership Manager offered to help Jade make an appointment to see the doctor, something Jade shared she had previously been hesitant to do. A few days passed. Jade had been to see the onsite GP and was now picking up one of her children from the onsite early learning centre, following her appointment. In chatting with one of the Early Childhood Workers, Jade mentioned she was stressed about food - they had little at home and money was tight.

Upon hearing this the Early Childhood Worker brought Jade over to meet the Early Help Support Worker, who was based just across the hall from the early learning centre. Through the Early Help Support Worker, Jade was linked into some emergency food relief but the support didn't end there. The Early Help Support Worker also arranged to meet up with Jade again soon to see how things were going for Jade and her children and check in on any further supports Jade might be needing.

\*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and their families

### INSIGHTS

Touching upon multiple facets of the Early Help initiative, this story shows that through the simple act of listening to families about their interests and responding to these, can lead to increased **social and community connection** for families and to **parent's awareness of and participation in supports and services**. The ability to **warmly refer** this parent to Early Help support, onsite, **enabled the Early Childhood Worker to respond immediately to the family's need** for food relief, and paving the **way to longer term help**.

## Early Help Most Significant Change Story

<b>Story</b>	Baby College and Early Help as an Anchor
<b>What is the story?</b>	<p>A parent began attending Baby College while expecting their baby to arrive soon. The parent had had very little experience with children and babies. They were low in confidence and apprehensive about their ability to parent.</p> <p>The parent also experienced social isolation, mental health concerns and sensory challenges.</p> <p>Once the baby was born, the parent at times had involvement with Child Protection and had extended stays both in an in-patient mental health unit and an early parenting support centre. The parent also faced challenges with unstable housing.</p>
<b>What was the change?</b>	<p>Over the course of their attendance at Baby College, the parent has gained confidence in their parenting skills.</p> <p>Despite the challenges encountered through Child Protection and extended stays in support centres, the parent remained engaged with the Baby College program and facilitator. After being away, they returned to Baby College sessions and engaged with the facilitator/Early Help Practitioner for individual support.</p> <p>With time, the parent also began to build connections with the other parents attending Baby College and has developed a small support network.</p> <p>Through Baby College and Early Help Individual Support, the parent was also able to secure more permanent and suitable housing.</p>
<b>Why is this significant?</b>	<p>This story is significant because it demonstrates that Baby College, linked with Early Help Individual Support, can provide an anchor in the life of a family who experiences a high level of vulnerability and life challenges. It demonstrates that the right support, consistently available to parents who experience instability in various parts of their lives, can make a difference for families.</p>
<b>What difference has this made?</b>	<p>The difference for this parent is that they have strengthened their parenting skills, they have developed social networks, their confidence has grown, and they have obtained more secure housing – all of which has led to the parent feeling more positive. They are now better able to care for their child and better positioned to provide for their and their child’s needs.</p>

## Early Help Most Significant Change Story

<b>Story</b>	<b>Coming out of her shell – a new young mum</b>
<b>What is the story?</b>	<p>Growing up, Selena's* family life was not easy. She was out of her family home in her mid-teens, spent the following years in State care and hasn't had any contact with her birth family since. Now, some years later and in her early twenties she's living with her partner and a newborn.</p> <p>It was through a mental health support worker that Selena learned about Our Place and began attending one of the groups at the Our Place site. And it was here that she heard about Baby College. At the time she was pregnant, and Baby College sounded perfect for her as a first time and socially isolated mum.</p> <p>Selena had been wanting to get more involved in her local community, to develop friendships and was wanting to learn about parenting.</p>
<b>What was the change?</b>	<p>Selena became a regular participant in Baby College, catching multiple forms of public transport in order to get there each week. "The first session I went to, it kind of solidified everything I thought it was going to be. And I was 'yeah I'm sticking with this group'. It just felt very comfortable and safe, there were no wrong questions, no one was going to make fun of you if you felt like you had a silly question...It's a safe space and I really felt that from the get-go" she shares.</p> <p>Salena's baby soon arrived, and she was back at the group as quick as she could be, following the birth.</p> <p>There have been times as a new mum where Selena has felt down on herself, feeling like she wasn't doing anything 'right' as a parent, that at times nothing was working and that she was "just not a good parent". However, with the support of the group, things have turned around. She shares that she "feels really confident as a parent now, even if I do have those days where he won't settle, and I've done everything I can. I think about how [the Baby College facilitator] reminds me that I am 'completely new to this and that babies like to throw you a curve ball every now and again'".</p> <p>Selena has also developed friendships for the first time in a long time. She has connected with two of the other parents in the group and spends time with each of them on a regular basis outside of the Baby College sessions.</p>
<b>Why is this significant?</b>	<p>Salena's story is significant because, through the support of Baby College, she has been able to build a more positive perspective of herself as a parent and has been able to access and see a different – more confidence and more socially interactive side to herself. She has shared that she is better able to cope with the ups and downs of parenting and feels she has a new avenue of support in her life.</p>

## Early Help Most Significant Change Story

<p><b>What difference has this made?</b></p>	<p>For Selena, being a part of Baby College has had a positive impact across various aspects of her life: in terms of how she feels about herself, her knowledge of babies and parenting, and her experience of social isolation.</p> <p>Selena's participation in Baby College has meant that she has been able to develop friendships that she otherwise did not have and now spends time socialising with these new-found friends on a regular basis outside of the group.</p> <p>Understanding more about the ups and downs of parenting has enabled her to better cope with being a new mum and how she feels about herself as a parent.</p> <p>Through building her knowledge about parenting she is better able to give her baby the care and support her baby needs and feels comfortable to reach out for support if she needs it.</p> <p>She shares "It's made such a difference I don't think I would have learnt and grown as much without it. I would have felt more lost. I feel like it definitely made me come out of my shell. Like I didn't realise how confident and how fine I could be. I think what's enabled that is just how open and supportive everyone in the group is. I definitely feel more educated on baby stuff too and I just feel more confident about being a parent. If it wasn't for Baby College, I'd definitely have a lot less friends, a lot less support."</p>
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### Connecting Through Supported Playgroup

A mum with a young baby and a 3 y/o began attending supported playgroup following referral from the Maternal and Child Health Nurse onsite, as she was isolated with little to no family, friends, or support. Mum had little English as English was her second language, her first language was Karenni. Mum expressed that she wanted her daughters to make friends and play with other children. The mum continued to attend regularly, even though her daughter mostly played alongside the mum and her baby sister.

The Supported Playgroup Facilitator spent time playing alongside the mum and children (parallel play) and then with them as they became more familiar with and comfortable in the group. The Supported Playgroup Facilitator was able to engage the older child in side-by-side play with other children at playgroup while the mum sat slightly away to feed the baby.

Shortly after mum began attending the group, another family who spoke Karenni as their first language, also with a 3 y/o child, joined the group. The Facilitator introduced the mums to each other.

The Facilitator was able to take on the role of being a link for this socially isolated family. Through the supported playgroup the children were linked to education and other children. The family were connected to other young families. Mum was introduced to other mums both from their same and different cultures. These connections led to friendships and with further support and discussion, the Playgroup Facilitator supported Mum to enrol her 3 y/o into the kindergarten at the Our Place site.

Mum and children have made connections and friendships with another family from the same culture, with mum stating to the Playgroup Facilitator, 'My friend is coming to Playgroup today'.

The 3 y/o child has now started Kindergarten. The mum and children gained confidence and the mum encouraged her 'new friend' to also get support to enrol her daughter in kindergarten.

## INSIGHTS

This story highlights the **supportive referral pathway** at the Our Place site that has led to **increased social connection** for this isolated mum and to her **child's participation in kindergarten**. With Maternal and Child Health services onsite and easily able to refer to the Early Help supported playgroup, and with the skills of the supported playgroup facilitator, this family have been supported to overcome language and cultural barriers and have developed new friendships. The story demonstrates how services can work together, and how using a **family-centred approach** can lead to engagement in early childhood education for families who may otherwise struggle to know about and connect with the supports available to them within the Australian context.



## Early Help Most Significant Change Story

<b>Story</b>	It's a happy place
<b>What is the story?</b>	<p>Taraji* was new to the area along with her husband and 3-year-old son. With English as a second language and no family or friendships close by, Taraji and her son were spending most of their time on their own at home while Taraji's husband was at work.</p> <p>Her son was not sleeping well, had speech delays, and clung to mum whenever they went outside. Mum was feeling depressed, isolated, and desperate to connect with others.</p>
<b>What was the change?</b>	<p>Taraji began attending the Early Help supported playgroup at Our Place and soon things began to change for both Taraji and her son. Taraji began to develop friendships with other playgroup participants, came along to a second playgroup each week and started to access individual support through the Early Help Support Worker. A referral was made for Taraji and her son to attend a 4-day sleep training program with huge success. Taraji's son immediately began sleeping well which led to improvements in his eating, behaviour, and speech. When she came back to playgroup, everyone was asking "Is he the same one? Did you change him?".</p> <p>Through the Early Help individual support, Taraji was also supported to enrol her son in daycare and for herself to enrol in a Certificate 3 course, as the first steps towards finding work for herself.</p>
<b>Why is this significant?</b>	<p>This story shows how multiple supports through Early Help have significantly impacted the health and wellbeing of both Taraji and her son. Early Help at Our Place has enabled new opportunities for Taraji and her son's participation in supports and education, increased social connection and has supported Taraji in her confidence to respond to parenting challenges.</p>
<b>What difference has this made?</b>	<p>For Taraji her life in Australia has turned around from long days spent alone at home with her son, experiencing sleep deprivation, and concerns for her son's health and wellbeing. Through accessing Early Help supports, Taraji's son is happier and healthier and is more able to engage with others.</p> <p>For Taraji herself, she feels more positive, more connected to her local community and has access to support when she needs it. She shares that she is feeling optimistic about a future where she can build her career and where her family can feel more settled with life in Australia.</p> <p>About Early Help at Our Place, she shares "I just love it over here. That's what makes me come again and again. We don't talk to everyone daily, but still, we have the connection. That's important, I think. It's a happy place."</p>

\*Name has been changed to protect privacy

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### Getting Along Better Now

Mum had come to the region having fled family violence from a town many miles away. Struggling with neurodivergence, mental health concerns, homelessness, social isolation and parenting two children under the age of five, Mum has a lot on her plate.

With the children attending the Early Learning Centre at the Our Place site, Mum came across the Our Place team who then linked her into Early Help. Through Early Help at Our Place, Mum and her family have experienced positive change in a number of ways.

Mum sees herself as very shy and hesitant in social situations – not really enjoying interacting with others, especially those she doesn't know. Following a warm introduction to the supported playgroup by an Our Place staff member, she began to regularly attend a range of Early Help activities and supports because "everyone was so welcoming and understanding of my shyness".

Following her initial involvement with the supported playgroup, she joined 'Connect Up' (an Early Help social connection group at the school), and the after-school cooking and games programs with her children. She shares she has "made a couple of other mum friends" in the supported playgroup.

Often struggling with significant mental health concerns, Mum has also sought valuable support through the Early Help practitioners and Our Place staff available on site. At times these mental health concerns have been a risk to her own safety and that of her children, however the Our Place and Early Help staff have been able to provide her with the help she has needed.

Access to supports for mental health and increased social interactions have been positive for Mum, for her children and for family dynamics.

She shares "quite a few times I've been able to talk to people there [onsite] and they've been able to help me with suicidal thoughts". And regarding family connections "I feel like we are spending more time together rather than just sitting on phones and tablets in the same room. We're doing more together....It's been great".

Overall, for Mum these supports have led to less confrontation between her and her kids. "We're getting along better now – my kids and I used to butt heads a little bit. It has been really good for my mental health and I really enjoy the groups".

## INSIGHTS

The creation of safe and supportive environments for families who face multiple challenges plays an important role in early intervention. Building trust with families can open up opportunities for engagement in activities and supports, leading to examples of increased social connection, reaching out for support and improvements in the quality of parent-child interactions as can be seen for this family. By working together, early learning centre, Our Place and Early Help staff can create a cohesive response to families at risk.

## Early Help Most Significant Change Story

<b>Story</b>	<b>Returning to work as a mum with a young baby</b>
<b>What is the story?</b>	<p>A mum with a young baby began attending Baby College as she was isolated with little to no family, friends, or support. Mum expressed her anxiety about caring for a new baby because she was a first-time mum with no one who she could ask questions. The mum was anxious and apprehensive of services due to her negative experience with a service when her newborn baby was very unwell in hospital. Mum was also apprehensive about returning to work and placing her son in care, however stated financially she needed to return to work full time after 6 months.</p>
<b>What was the change?</b>	<p>Through regular attendance, parent education, support and connection at Baby College, the mum has begun to build on her parenting skills, built friendships with other mums attending Baby College and built trust with the Baby College Facilitators. Baby College facilitators were able to support the mum to explore and enrol her son in the Childcare at the site where Baby Collage is facilitated. Mum started her son at Childcare and returned to work full time.</p>
<b>Why is this significant?</b>	<p>Once mum had returned to work fulltime, she negotiated with her workplace to still attend Baby College as she stated this was very important for her son and her own wellbeing. The mum has the confidence to pick her son up from childcare, which is on site where Baby College runs, brings him to Baby College and then takes him back to childcare.</p> <p>Through the trust built with Baby College Facilitators, the mum feels able to ask for support when needed.</p>
<b>What difference has this made?</b>	<p>Mum and baby have made connections with services in the community such as childcare and attending the 'Baby Rhyme Time' at the library.</p> <p>Mum has also built a support network with Childcare, Baby College facilitators and other mums at Baby College.</p>

## Early Help at Our Place Vignettes

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The following vignettes demonstrate the impact that the Early Help Family Services trial has had on families at Our Place Northern Bay and Our Place Morwell. These stories have been gathered as part of the evaluation of the Early Help at Our Place trial in 2022 – 2023.

### Vignette 1

*A mum attending Baby College was a first-time mum who was isolated with no family, friends, or support. She was apprehensive about services as she had had negative experiences in the past. Financial pressures required a return to work, and she was feeling stressed about this transition. Through regular attendance at Baby College the mum has begun to build on her parenting skills, established new friendships with other mums and has built trust with the group's facilitators. This has enabled her to more confidently enrol her son in childcare, access new community activities at her local library and expand her social and support networks.*

**Key themes:** Baby College helps to expand support networks, build trust and confidence and opportunities for isolated mothers. This allows them to participate in activities such as other community groups and paid employment leading to increased family wellbeing.

### Vignette 2

*A mum began regularly sitting in the Our Place foyer whilst waiting for the local bus. On one occasion she looked like she may have felt out of place and was struggling. Noticing this and upon hearing from the mum that she had just been assaulted by a family member, the Our Place Partnership Manager immediately introduced her to the Early Help worker.*

**Key themes:** By working together, Our Place, Early Help and the School were able to identify and provide support needs for this mum before difficulties escalated.

### Vignette 3

*The ability to provide continuity of support for families, through the Early Help model, is keeping a Baby College mum connected despite recently breaking her leg and now unable to attend Baby College sessions. The Baby College facilitators have been able to reach out to this mum, through the 'individual support / brief intervention' stream of Early Help and have been able to arrange additional, much needed support as this mum manages a newborn and her broken leg.*

**Key themes:** Having a range of Early Help interventions to draw from enables family-centred responses and a more cohesive service response to families. Sustains social connection for families and enables greater awareness of and participation in supports and services.

#### Vignette 4

*Mum was faced with multiple challenges. She had fled family violence; arrived in a new town; experiences challenges retaining information and is homeless – staying in hotels. She has two children under the age of five and struggles with significant mental health concerns. Following her children’s enrolment at the Early Learning Centre, Our Place linked her into Early Help supports. These included the supported playgroup, Connect Up (a social connections group) and individual support. Mum shared that the friendly and welcoming environment enabled her to continue to engage in these supports and as a result, she and her children spend more quality time together rather than being on their electronic devices and this had led to a better relationship with her children. She also shared that the support she received from Early Help and Our Place staff has helped her with her mental health.*

**Key themes:** The friendly and welcoming atmosphere of Early Help supports at Our Place sites enables parents to engage with activities that lead to improved mental health, reduced social isolation and strengthened family connections. For this mum there have been improvements in the quality of parent-child interactions.

#### Vignette 5

*Through warm engagement and warm referral amongst the Our Place and Early Help teams, a socially isolated mother with very limited English and separated from her family and friends in her home country, became involved in playgroup at the Our Place site where she began to develop friendships. Hearing about and seeing the positive impact this was having on her, her husband signed up for Circle of Security and Bringing Up Great Kids. He now attends the second playgroup each week and the whole family are now very much part of the Our Place community.*

**Key themes:** This story highlights the value of a range of services under one roof, the power of warm referral and the role of Our Place in linking families to Early Help

Early Help at Our Place is contributing to increased social / community connection and awareness of and participation in supports and services.

#### Vignette 6

*A mother has experienced a boost in her self-confidence to be able to participate in playgroup onsite, run by an Early Help practitioner, with her child for the first time, after feeling social isolated and in need of family counselling. This was all possible through the support of the Our Place team, the onsite MCH nurse and Early Help playgroup facilitator working together to identify and support this mother.*

**Key themes:** Strong relationships between universal services, Our Place and Early Help providers are supporting family engagement through warm referrals, particularly where relationships pre-date the Trial.

Early Help at Our Place sites is contributing to increased parental confidence, social / community connections and awareness of and participation in supports and services.

## Vignette 7

*One mother was connected to an Early Help worker by an early learning educator to receive timely emergency food relief after hearing the family did not have enough food at home.*

**Key themes:** Having Early Help on site supports the capacity of universal services to respond to family need.

## Vignette 8

*Mum and her kids had been going through a rough time and had only recently returned to the school. They had been struggling for quite some time and recently mum had been aggressive towards a teacher. The school were concerned that the issues would escalate as they had before, which had resulted in the children's extended absence.*

*Following her engagement with Early Help support, the mum has returned with her children to the school and her interactions with school staff have been increasingly positive.*

**Key themes:** This collective approach and the assistance provided has supported consistency in the children's ongoing attendance and participation in education.

## Vignette 9

*Caring for 8 children, 5 of whom are in nappies and 4 of whom are a part of kinship care, this mother was facing roadblocks in the system, leaving her no support at all. Despite her efforts to address this, her pleas for help have gone unanswered. Through persistence, perseverance, and determination, the Our Place Partnership Manager and Early Help Practitioner have arranged the financial support this mother was due, additional financial support for groceries, a delivery of nappies and are continuing to advocate for ongoing care coordination to ensure support continues longer term.*

**Key themes:** With Our Place and Early Help working closely together, families are accessed early in life and early in need. Support in this instance has been family-centred and is contributing to a more cohesive service response for families.

## Vignette 10

*A Kinder teacher walked a family, who were experiencing significant family violence, over to Early Help at the Our Place site. The family were homeless and were staying in a hotel. The Early Help worker was immediately able to talk with the mum of this family and reassure her that there was somewhere for her to come for help. Alongside some initial emotional support, the Early Help worker was able to provide food vouchers, petrol vouchers, a phone, and was able to support linkages to local service supports.*

**Key themes:** With Early Help on site in Our Place settings, education staff are better able to respond to family concerns at the time of need. Early Help is able to provide instantaneous, practical support whilst families are also linked in to and await longer term help.

## Vignette 11

*During Transition Day activities, Our Place connected with a mother parenting two neurodiverse children, who had just been returned to her from kinship care placement. Her children's attendance at school was patchy largely due to transport issues. She was also facing financial and health issues. Our Place attempted to link the parent to an EH Practitioner, however important cues and opportunities for engagement were missed. Not wanting to lose the opportunity to ensure this mother was supported, Our Place then linked this mum with the school wellbeing team, who provided practical assistance straight away.*

**Key themes:** There is a need to invest in building the capacity of the Early Help workforce in new ways of working / new approaches to family engagement.



## Appendix F – Early Help at Our Place Evaluation Report

INTERVENTION STREAM	EARLY HELP AT OUR PLACE ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED				
	Northern Bay		Morwell		
<b>INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT</b> Brief intervention	Practitioner available onsite 4 days per week		Practitioner available onsite 5 days per week		
<b>GROUP-BASED DELIVERY</b> Parent Groups Parent Education Groups Peer Support Groups	Bringing Up Great Kids Taster Sessions (Healthy Lunchbox, Setting Routines) Tuning into Kids No peer support groups delivered on site		Connect Up Holiday program Parent information session – Snack Attack KIDDO Physical Literacy Program No peer support groups delivered on site		
<b>FLEXIBLE FUNDING</b>	Funding Bi-Cultural worker Wonderkind Play Therapy sessions Playgroup Open Week Music Sessions Cognitive Assessments Autism Spectrum Disorder Assessments		Medical assistance Fuel assistance Rent assistance Clothing Amenities Playgroup resources	Community access support Vouchers Holiday program resources Skip-bin hire Furniture & household goods School uniform purchase	KIDDO program Food purchase Pediatrician fees Ambulance cover Mother’s Day gifts Vehicle purchase
<b>CAPACITY BUILDING AT THE UNIVERSAL SITE</b>	EH Representation at Site Services Advisory Group NDIS Information session for site partners Early Help contribution to Our Place Quarterly Wrap Site Services Networking Lunch EH attendance at Early Years Service Staff meeting EH input into site Warm Referral protocol EH representation at COL working group EH representation at Koori Education Workforce group EH representation at NDIS/Barwon Health session EH attendance at Kinder Orientation sessions onsite EH representation in Foundation House Early Years Refugee/Asylum Seeker Onsite Community of Practice		EH representation at Kids Expo Ad-hoc consultations with Early Year’s staff		
<b>Additional intervention / activities unique to Early Help in Our Place settings</b>					
<b>UNIVERSALLY TARGETED GROUPS</b>	Supported playgroups Baby College		Supported playgroups Baby College		
<b>OUR PLACE APPROACH</b>  (*this does not reflect the entirety of the OP contribution, but rather focusses key activities OP have led, provided or provided linkages to)	Engagement Blitz (family engagement) Gather & Connect Story Time Story Walk Children’s week site event School Orientation Program Site staff networking BBQs and lunches Attendance at My Time Linking EH into Foundation House Early Years Refugee/Asylum Seeker Onsite Community of Practice Lead Absenteeism trial Linking EH into above mentioned groups and sessions		NDIS/ECEI (Early Childhood Early Intervention support) PD – ELC Contenance PD – ELC Story Time After-school family engagement cooking program (OP & EH) After-School family engagement games program (OP & EH) Prep-transition day morning tea Parent Advisory Group meetings KIDDO Physical Literacy Program (join arrangement OP & EH) MCH onsite Onsite GP Tabitha’s Closet travelling / pop up Op Shop visiting site Contenance nurse visits NDIS support onsite Lead Absenteeism Trial Instigate Team Building Workshop Lead development of Playgroup Outcomes-based Practice Plan		

\*only includes Early Help intervention activities delivered on Our Place sites. A range of additional Early Help activities were delivered by Early Help family service providers at other nearby location

## Universally targeted groups

As part of contractual arrangements for service delivery at Our Place sites, Early Help service provision included delivery of ‘universally targeted groups’ alongside the range of interventions included as part of the original Early Help Family Services model. Universally targeted groups included both universally accessible, supported playgroups and the Our Place-designed Baby College program.

Playgroups and Baby College programs were provided at both of the Trial sites and stand out as an extremely successful part of the trial. This is both in terms of family participation rates and in terms of positive short-term impacts on families involved. The implementation and impact of these two programs are outlined below.

### Supported Playgroups

Universally accessed, supported playgroups are open to families with children aged 0-5. They are a place where families can connect to their local community, where parents can develop parenting skills and where children can socialise and learn. Five Early Help playgroups were run at the two Our Place sites, with each session running for 2 hrs on a weekly basis, during school terms. Whilst each site began with just one Early Help playgroup scheduled each week, demand from families and the expansion of one of the Our Place sites (to include an additional school) has seen the number of groups and sessions offered, increase over time.

At each Our Place site, playgroup sessions were co-led by Early Help facilitators from two Early Help family service providers located at each site.

Early Help playgroup successes include:

- Staff reporting consistently high numbers of families attending and the addition of new sessions to accommodate numbers at one of the sites
- New and vulnerable parents and children participating
- Positive impacts for parents and children such as connecting to additional supports and other activities onsite, expanded social networks and increased parenting skills.

A parent shared how attending playgroup has exposed her to new ways of parenting and reduced her sense of isolation:

*“Coming to playgroup has made such a difference to me. I feel like I am becoming a better parent because of the things I am learning here. Like, it makes you think about things differently because we find out about other ways of doing things with your kids. And I like talking to the other mums. You don’t feel so alone.”*

Additionally, the playgroup program alongside Early Help access to flexible funding, provided a valuable opportunity to strengthen family access to support. Due to significantly high numbers of Karen/Karenni families attending the playgroups at one of the sites, the opportunity for additional cultural supports to better engage and support participating families was identified.

At this site, the Early Help Project Advisory Group worked collectively to respond to this identified need. Drawing on the cultural expertise of one of the Early Help service providers and through the availability of Early Help flexible funding, a bi-cultural worker was engaged to attend playgroup on a weekly basis. The bi-cultural worker engaged with participating Karen/Karenni families, providing valuable support such as:

See the following case study stories:

Just Across the Corridor

The Whole Family

Connecting through supported playgroup

A Happy Place

Getting Along Better Now

- Identifying children who were eligible for kinder and assisting with the enrolment process
- Assisting with translating / passing on key playgroup / parenting messages
- Referring families to individual family support
- Assisting Karen playgroup families to be heard as part of the Our Place Parent Voice survey
- Identifying topics that families would like to know more about i.e. healthy lunch boxes.

Being newly arrived to Australia, one of the playgroup parents shared the benefits she experiences from attending playgroup including learning about parenting and life in Australia:

*“Here I like it. I learn for children and the life here and how to fill the forms, where to go to do the things. And I find people from my country.”* Early Help Playgroup parent

This initiative provides a clear example of family-centred care, where service providers have worked together to find a local solution to a local need. Additionally, this initiative also highlights how the availability of flexible funding has been a key enabler for this to occur and the role that playgroups can play, as a platform for family engagement and connection to further supports. It shows how different elements of Early Help can come together and can lead to meaningful family outcomes.

A staff member shared:

*“There was a stage last year when we had 18 Karen/Karenni families enrolled in the playgroups, so to be able to have that co-facilitation occur with the bi-cultural worker within that group obviously makes that a far more valuable experience for everybody.”*

The success of Early Help playgroups can be seen in the numbers of families attending the sessions. At one of the sites, due to overwhelming demand, the offering of playgroup has increased from one session per week to two per week, with preparations for a third underway at the time of writing.

Early Help Playgroup attendance data collected by Our Place indicates high attendance rates as outlined in the tables below.

*Table 1 – Early Help Playgroup participation rates Northern Bay site*

Early Help Playgroups Northern Bay		
School Term	Number of sessions	Number of attendances*
July – September, 2022	18	163
October – December 2022	19	354
Jan – April, 2023	19	470
April – June, 2023	16	424

\*Attendances – counts attendances not individual participants

*Table 2 – Early Help Playgroup participation rates Northern Bay site*

Early Help Playgroups Morwell		
School Term	Number of sessions	Number of attendances*
Jan – April, 2023	14	33
April – June, 2023	21	100

\*Attendances – counts attendances not individual participants

Additionally, the Our Place Parent Voice survey conducted at one of the Our Place Early Help sites in mid-2023 (see P.10 Early Help Evaluation Final Report) showed that of 39 parents interviewed, there was a high uptake and use of playgroups: 85% were aware of playgroups onsite, 21% had used them and 8% Did not know about them, with a further 18% not needing them. Of those who had been involved in a playgroup, most found it either very (45%) or extremely (45%) helpful, while one parent had found it moderately helpful and another slightly helpful.

## Baby College

Baby College aims to improve educational outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage by engaging and supporting mothers in their third trimester of pregnancy and through their first year of parenting. Focusing on early engagement and prevention, Baby College involves skilled facilitators with early childhood and parenting expertise to deliver a flexible curriculum based on evidence. Baby College runs weekly sessions over a 12-month period and was delivered at both sites. In a similar way to the Early Help supported playgroups, Baby College sessions were jointly facilitated, bringing together practitioners from different Early Help family service providers at each site.

Prior to the commencement of Baby College, Our Place provided program training to Early Help operational and senior family service provider staff. In addition, family service providers were provided with a Baby College Implementation Guide and access to the Our Place Senior Advisor, Early Years, for ongoing guidance and advice as needed.

In a similar way to the supported playgroups, Baby College has seen success in a range of ways, such as:

- Parents reporting positive impacts and outcomes from attending, including improved parental skills and confidence
- New and vulnerable parents and children participating
- Participating parents connecting into additional supports, including external services, other activities on Our Place sites and expanding their social networks.
- Stable attendance from participating families

Parents shared powerful stories about the impact that Baby College has had on their understanding of parenting, their self-perceptions and self-belief, their knowledge of baby-care and their sense of connection.

Parents also highlighted benefits from the program such as assistance with sleep routines, information about nutrition, and the supportive nature of the program:

*"...just the talking about the ways to play with the baby and engage with them, to stay calm is useful. We did a day on selfcare – that was helpful. Sleep and settling. I think we might have done something about food. Talking to the other mums and seeing the other babies – it's nice. And you can stay until they are two years old which is nice."*

*"It's a lot of fun and it's really helpful and its supportive and the baby really likes it. It's really well run. Yeah its just a really nice program. Its very thoughtful. All the things we do are really thoughtful."*

Another parent shared the impact the program has on her son:

*"[My son] seems really happy and chatty, he seems really happy after we have been here [at Baby College]."*

See the following case study stories:

Returning to Work as a Mum with a Young Baby

Coming out of her shell

Baby College as an Anchor

Baby College facilitators have also noted a number of benefits such as the social connections made by parents in the groups:

*“Each of them [participants] were very isolated and didn’t feel like they had any friends, but by the end of the session they were swapping names and Facebook pages.”*

*“Baby College – the fact that it’s met a niche need. We’ve had consistent people turning up each week that have formed relationships with the facilitators and each other. The fact that we did that scoping and it’s different to Bumps to Bubs and those programs, it does meet a need for families. The fact that that is now well established has been a real success on site.”*

Additionally, facilitators highlighted benefits around access to information and the reassurance Baby College can offer to parents feeling unsure:

*“Parents want education and information and a safe space. Obviously, there’s a readiness for a space to feel connected with other mums and a yearning for information.”*

*“Playgroups are focussed on kids. This program, the focus is on mums. They just want to know they are doing a good job and that we all make mistakes and that’s okay.”*

Once again, in a similar way to playgroups, the flexibility for Early Help practitioners to be able to work across and between interventions has been a valuable way to provide more holistic and cohesive assistance to families, aiding consistency in care provision. Examples have emerged at both sites where Early Help practitioners have been able to develop a trusting relationship through Baby College and have then been able to carry this over to provision of brief individual support to some of those same families.

[See Most Significant Change Story](#)  
Baby College and Early Help as an Anchor

Data collected on sessions run and participation rates for the Baby College program run as part of Early Help indicate stable and/or increasing numbers over time as highlighted in the following table.

Table 3 – Early Help Baby College sessions and participation rates, both sites.

Baby College Northern Bay		
School Term	Number of sessions	Average number of attendances per session
July – September, 2022	3	3
October – December 2022	8	5
Jan – April, 2023	7	8
April – June, 2023	7	7
Baby College Morwell		
School Term	Number of sessions	Average number of attendances per session
July – September, 2022	Unavailable	Unavailable
October – December 2022	11	3
Jan – April, 2023	10	2
April – June, 2023	8	3

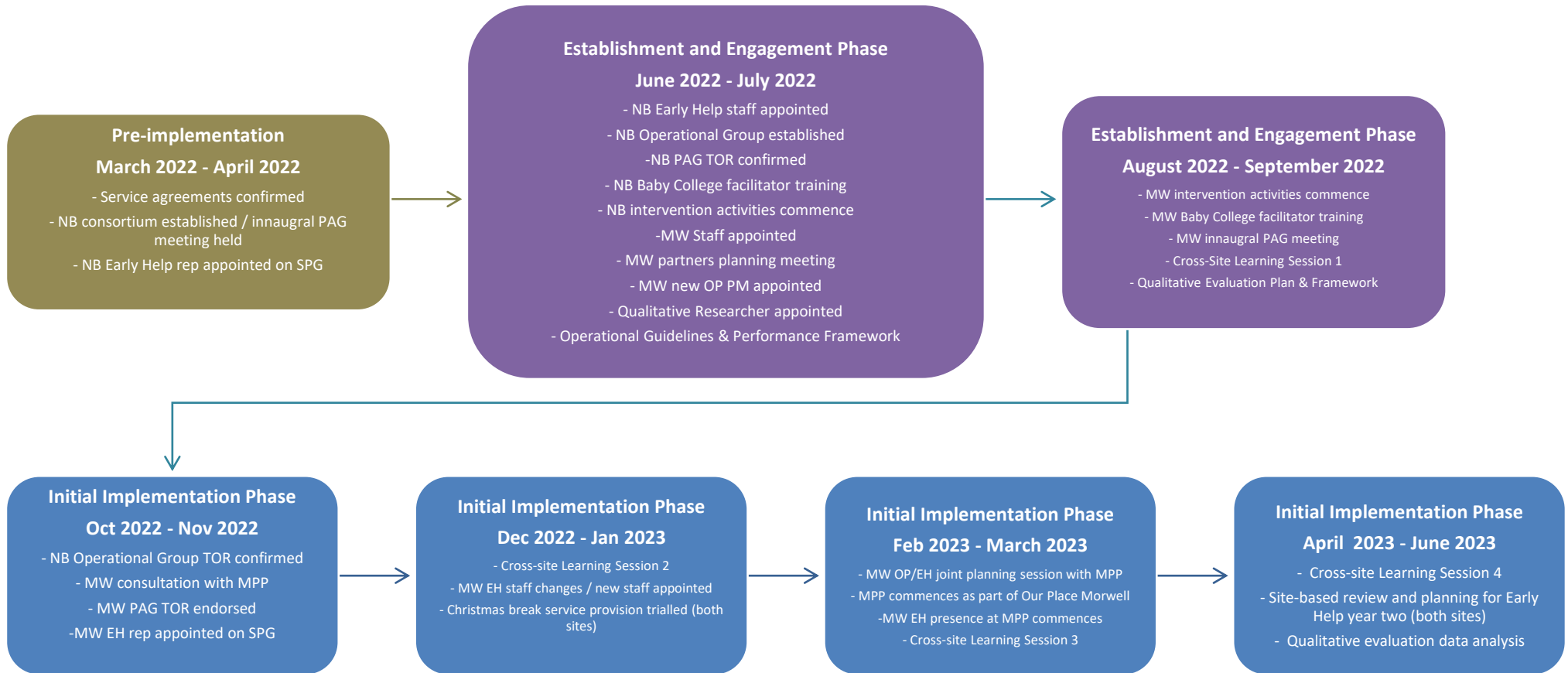
### *In summary*

The success that these universally accessible, supported programs indicate they play a valuable role in early family engagement, in building parenting capacity and in acting as a platform for family connection to wider resources and opportunities that can have significantly positive implications on child and parent wellbeing.

**Key**

- MW – Morwell Site
- MWC - Morwell Central Primary School site
- MWPP – Morwell Park Primary School site
- NB – Northern Bay site

### Early Help at Our Place Implementation Timeline





### Early Help at Our Place Counterfactual Enquiry

As part of the Evaluation of Early Help at Our Place, Our Place conducted an examination of selected Our Place sites that do not have the fulltime presence of Early Help Family services on site. The aim of this work was to provide expanded contextual and comparative insight into what it means to locate Early Help at Our Place sites and has been an extension of the initial framework for the evaluation of the Early Help trial at Our Place.

The examination involved a selection of Our Place sites where Early Help is either not currently present or present only in a part time capacity and does not contractually involve Our Place.

The counterfactual enquiry has sought to identify the nature of locally based family support systems, including strengths and challenges in the systems as they pertain to Our Place sites and the function of Early Help. Focus group discussions were held representing six Our Place sites, reflecting a mix of both urban and regional settings.

**Overall, the counterfactual enquiry has clearly identified the need for additional family supports at Our Place sites.**

Themes emerging from focus group feedback indicate that many families face significant barriers to accessing the services they need at all or in a timely way. This is the case for those sites that do not have access to Early Help and for those that have Early Help onsite in a part time capacity. Barriers to access include: shortage of services available locally, protracted waiting times, gaps in appropriate services and changeable service availability (due to shifts in available funding).

Focus group participants identified a lack of local services and extended wait times as some of the key barriers to accessing support services for families:

“There are new services that have resulted from the Royal Commission into Mental health, but they are all 80ks away. For a mum with kids and no car, that’s just not an option.”

“Orange Door has an active hold function and so a family could be on active hold for months and months.”

It has emerged that there would be value in integrated, comprehensive family supports at Our Place sites to provide early intervention where supports are unavailable for families, to assist families with service navigation and in the destigmatisation of help seeking behaviour. In addition, such support would complement the role of Our Place Community Facilitators by bringing resources on site that extend beyond family engaged and are dedicated to family support. Such support would be optimised where support workers are integrated with and embedded in the networks, structures and relationships on site, enabling more families to benefit.

## Themes

Specific themes that emerged include:

### 1. **Service navigation as a common ongoing challenge impeding family engagement with services available.**

Challenges around service navigation involve an absence of family knowledge about services, however more commonly relates to the complexity of processes surrounding service access. An Our Place Partnership Manager shared an example from their onsite Paediatrician that highlights the need for service navigation support, in this case with the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

“At the moment, the Paediatrician assists families to navigate the NDIS in her own time. She says there are probably an additional 10 families a month who need someone to sit with them and track through how to fill out the forms.”

For many families, reduced service engagement can often result in undiagnosed developmental delays for children, as another Partnership Manager shares:

“That [service navigation support] is a massive need here. There’s a lot of little children in the housing estate who have got all sorts of developmental delays and when they get to school, they are vulnerable on a number of domains because [assessment] hasn’t happened early and the families haven’t had someone to do that with them, through relationship.”

### 2. **For families, stigma associated with service engagement limits family help seeking.**

Many parents are reluctant to address their concerns due to the perceptions they hold, or fear others hold, about the difficulties they face. Focus group participants shared:

“So many families in this community avoid that [help-seeking] because of that whole stigma around disability.”

“Stigma is something that really is a barrier. If a child is not developmentally on track and that needs to be flagged with the family ... I could really see a role, if we had an Early Help function here. I think that could be really good. Because in those early years it’s very challenging and very emotive and you need someone who is actually going to hold your hand through that process.”

Initiatives that help to normalise diversity (such as disability), the challenges that parents face and that encourage help-seeking behaviours are needed.

### 3. **Additional onsite supports strengthen the capacity of Our Place sites to respond to families.**

Whilst family engagement is a critical component of the Our Place Community Facilitator role, it sits amongst a range of responsibilities aimed at embedding the Our Place approach across the site. Where families may present to an Our Place Community Facilitator, with a range of needs and / or complexity, there is limited capacity for Our Place Community Facilitators to assist to the extent that families may need.

Two examples, shared by Partnership Managers demonstrate, firstly, the extent to which Community Facilitator time can be called upon by families, and secondly, the benefit of having trained family support assistance on site to complement the work of Our Place:

“One of our Community Facilitators has supported a family with up to six or seven warm referrals. But that’s not sustainable for multiple families in the time and scope Community Facilitators have available.”

“One of the best outcomes was that the [part time] Early Help worker managed to support someone with really complex needs into long term support and that wouldn’t have been possible for us to navigate so well as [Community Facilitators] aren’t required to be social workers. That’s the main benefit I see. Where we have complexity on site and there wasn’t another resource where we could do a warm referral in person and that is the benefit of being able to have them there. It would be a real gap if they left.”

The availability of resources that are specifically dedicated to family support, beyond family engagement, will better enable family needs to be met.

#### **4. The degree to which part-time Early Help Family Service Providers integrate with Our Place sites is variable.**

In the case where Early Help is present on Our Place sites in a part time capacity, the extent to which there is integration with and engagement across the site varied significantly. Examples were shared where there was little to no integration resulting in missed opportunities for reaching families, warm referrals and for other associated benefits of service integration as one participant shared:

“I don’t feel that they are working in a way that is with us. They come on a day when there is no playgroups or other groups that they can go to, to access families...I don’t believe that there are any local groups, at this point, joining their groups.”

Examples, were however also shared, indicating efforts to integrate with the Our Place site through attendance at onsite network meetings, regular liaison with Our Place staff and a demonstrated interest in understanding onsite activities taking place.

## **Conclusion**

Families in a range of communities where Our Place is located experience a number of barriers to accessing the support they need. Barriers range from a lack of service availability, service suitability, timely support, service system complexity and stigma associated with seeking help. Whilst Our Place Community Facilitators play a valuable role in engaging and supporting families at Our Place sites, the extent to which this can occur is limited. The addition of dedicated family support resources that are actively integrated with and embedded on site will likely lead to increased family support and associated positive outcomes for parents and children.