

Links to Early Learning

Evaluation report

Public Report October 2021

Introduction

Context and background

dandolopartners was commissioned by the Paul Ramsay Foundation to evaluate the impact of Links to Early Learning, a program which the Foundation funded from June 2018 to December 2021. The Foundation provided inputs into scoping and direction alongside Dandolo and L2EL, and the evaluation was carried out independently by dandolopartners. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

The Foundation has made insights from this evaluation public to contribute to the broader evidence base around breaking cycles of disadvantage.

Links to Early Learning aims to improve access to early learning for children and families experiencing significant disadvantage. It is run by Uniting NSW/ACT (“Uniting”) and operates in a broad catchment area in South Western Sydney.

The Foundation would like to thank Links to Early Learning for its contributions to this evaluation.

This evaluation builds on an earlier process evaluation initiated by Uniting, supported by Western Sydney University (WSU) (see Appendix A), updating their analysis with data from the most recent year of the program and focusing particularly on progress towards the program’s intended outcomes.

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About Links to Early Learning

Links to Early Learning aims to reduce barriers to early childhood education and care (ECEC) participation and increase school readiness. It seeks to achieve this through targeting vulnerable cohorts, individualising services and support, connecting them to ECEC services and sustaining their participation until school.

Developed in 2017 by Uniting, Links to Early Learning started as a social investment pilot to explore how to increase vulnerable children's engagement with, and participation in, early learning in the two years prior to starting school. This was in response to evidence that the cohort of children who would benefit the most from quality early learning support were the least likely to access it.

Program description

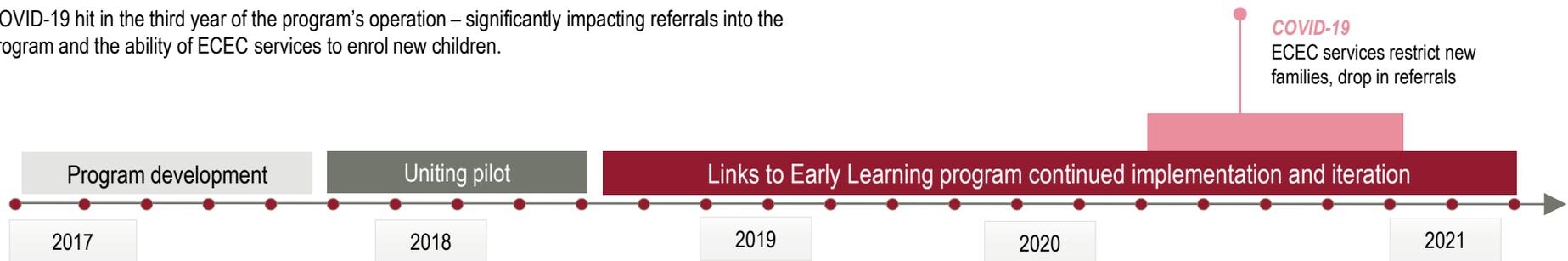
Links to Early Learning provides an experienced early childhood professional to work one-on-one with parents and carers who have been referred to the program because they are not accessing early childhood education. This early childhood professional establishes strong relationships with families, building trust and understanding the family's priorities. They then assist families to successfully navigate the ECEC sector, to break down any barriers to their child accessing and maintaining participation in a quality early learning centre, and to set their child up for a successful start to school.

The program team also has an important role to play in building the capacity of centre staff in relation to understanding and meeting the needs of vulnerable children and their families. As part of continuously seeking to understand the facilitators and barriers to children accessing early learning, the program team observe for gaps in systems which could benefit from collaboration to improve the responsiveness of the sector to the needs of individuals and cohorts.

Timeline 2016-2021

Links to Early Learning was developed in 2017 and started as a pilot towards the end of the year.

COVID-19 hit in the third year of the program's operation – significantly impacting referrals into the program and the ability of ECEC services to enrol new children.



The Links to Early Learning team includes:

Links to Early Learning Coordinator (1x FTE): Responsible for the leadership and delivery of the Links to Early Learning Demonstration Project. Responsibilities include: screening, assessment, planning, and implementation of relevant programs, and establishing referral pathways to other community services.

Early Learning Linkers (3.2x FTE): Responsible for providing direct support to disadvantaged families to identify and address barriers to engagement in order to assist families to access Early Learning services and empowering centre staff to meet the child's and family's needs. Linkers have early childhood tertiary qualifications and have a broad knowledge of, and experience working with, early learning services, allied health professionals, family support services, and other government and non-government community services.

Theory of Change

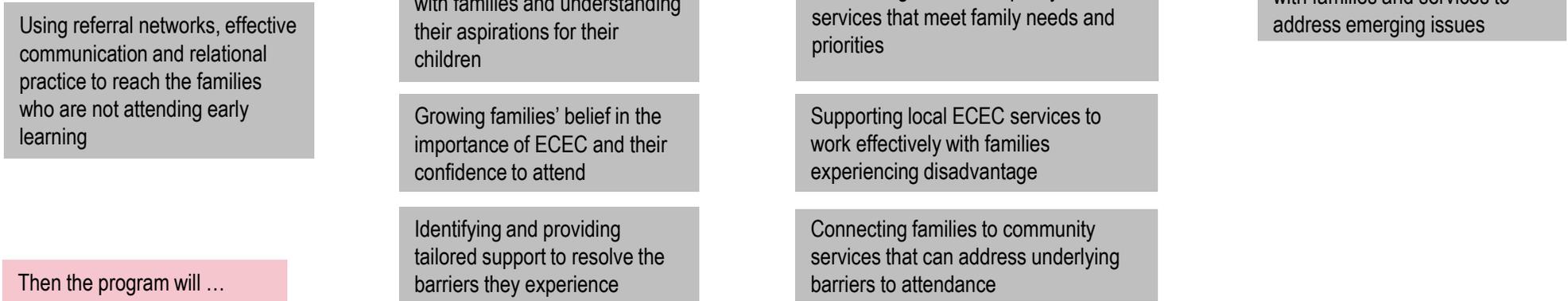
Links to Early Learning's activities, priorities and ways of working are reflected in its theory of change, which is focused on increasing children's readiness for school.

The problem Links to Early Learning is solving: The cohort of children most likely to benefit from quality ECEC are those least likely to attend because their families experience a range of financial and non-financial barriers to access. This means some children start school behind their peers, and evidence shows many never catch up.

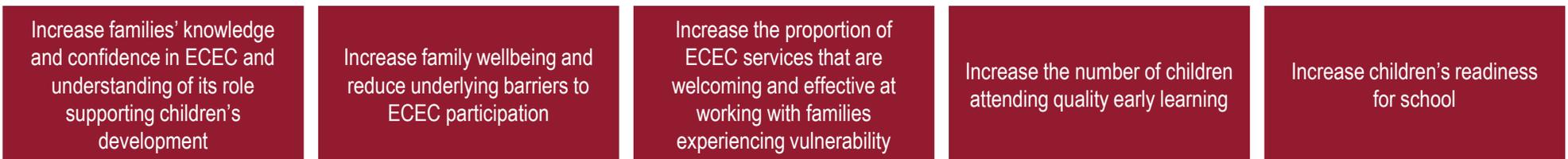
If Links to Early Learning ...



By ...



Then the program will ...



Methodology

We used a range of approaches to gather data for this evaluation and developed a clear understanding of the program and its impact.

Our approach

We used a range of methods to understand Links to Early Learning, its implementation and its impact on children and families.

An earlier evaluation of Links to Early Learning covered the first two years of the program, and included analysis of existing data and a number of interviews with families participating in the program.* We built on this earlier work, focusing our analysis on the most recent year of data, the experience of ECEC services and the overall effects of the program.



Document review

Comprehensive review of key program documentation, including the new Practice Manual, marketing material, and previous evaluations and analysis.



Client Register data analysis

Extensive analysis of Links to Early Learning's Client Register, with detailed client-level information.



Interviews with Links to Early Learning staff

Semi-structured interviews with each of the three key Linkers and the team leader.



Interviews with ECEC services

Semi-structured interviews with the Centre Director at three services Links to Early Learning work with, and an area manager for a large network that they have partnered with.



Benchmarking and benefit-cost analysis

Review of other ECEC linker models and analysis of the benefit-cost ratio for Links to Early Learning.

Caveats

There are some limitations to this evaluation.

Our data analysis and qualitative data collection, combined with the earlier evaluation, provides a strong snapshot of how the program operates, the number of children and families engaged in the program, and the level and type of support they have received.

However, there are some limitations to the scope and focus of the analysis:

Data quality: Links to Early Learning collects data routinely, and the new Client Register developed in the last year provides comprehensive and granular data (produced following the previous evaluation). However, there are some gaps in the data, and there is inconsistency between the old and new client databases. Analysis of some elements – like the number and type of barriers experienced – are only available from the new Client Register which includes around 1/3 of participants.

Children's outcomes: Our data shows hours of enrolment, rather than confirmed attendance in ECEC, and we do not have direct measures of changes in children's development, including cognitive, social and emotional skills.

There is good evidence that regular attendance in quality ECEC has a significant impact on children's outcomes. Qualitative evidence from the Linkers and ECEC services indicates that once enrolled, the majority of Links children attend regularly. We are therefore using enrolment as a proxy for improved outcomes for children, noting that this may overstate benefits for children.

* We did not replicate the previous evaluation's interviews with families as their review was extensive. We have summarised key themes in Appendix A.

Executive summary

Key findings

Links to Early Learning provides the flexibility and resourcing to address the barriers that get in the way of families enrolling their children in early learning.

Links to Early Learning is meeting a genuine need in the community and a gap in the service system. The model is well-designed, grounded in evidence, and implemented well by a skilled and capable team. As a result:



Tailored support is effectively addressing the barriers families experience

75% of Links to Early Learning families experienced more than five barriers to accessing ECEC. The most common barriers were:

- Lack of access to support services
- Difficulty accessing and navigating the complex ECEC system – including ability to pay fees
- Complex life circumstances – including children and families from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds ('asylum seekers'), social isolation and trauma

Linkers are highly effective at building relationships with families, understanding their needs and priorities and providing a range of formal and informal supports to address those barriers. The model provides the flexibility and structure that equips Linkers to respond to individual family needs and priorities.



An additional 142 children are enrolled in ECEC

Around 80% of families who start in the program enrol their children in early learning. Our assessment is that the majority of these are unlikely to have accessed ECEC without Links to Early Learning.

90% of children are attending ECEC services that are Meeting or Exceeding the National Quality Standard (NQS).

Most children are enrolled for close to the optimum 15 hours per week. But at least a quarter of families were only enrolled for one day, largely because they could not afford additional days.

- 73% of children are enrolled for two days or more
- 28% are enrolled for 10-15 hours per week and 62% are enrolled for 15 hours or more
- 51% of children are enrolling at age 3

We do not have data on attendance but ECEC services reported that Links to Early Learning children tended to attend regularly and that Linkers were effective at sustaining enrolments.

Recommendations

1. **Maintain the flexibility:** The model's flexibility underpins its effectiveness and this should be reinforced and maintained.
2. **Consider the trade-offs of breadth v depth:** The broad catchment and eligibility has benefits but also carries risks.
3. **Monitor the 'conversion rate':** Links to Early Learning should consider strategies to increase the proportion of families who start in the program and are enrolled in ECEC.
3. **Actively manage key person risks:** The skills and mindsets of the team are a key asset and driver of impact.
4. **Dial up advocacy and systemic change:** Many of the barriers identified are systemic and, with additional resourcing, Links to Early Learning should leverage its expertise to contribute to policy change.
5. **Strengthen how data is collected and used:** There's an opportunity to improve the consistency of data collection, and better leverage valuable data for learning and refining practice.

The design and implementation of the model

Links to Early Learning is a well-designed and implemented program that is meeting a genuine need in the community. The core features of the design – its use of evidence, the flexibility of the model, and the capability of the team – are the key drivers of its impact.

The approach and design is based on evidence

Links to Early Learning focuses on a cohort of children that evidence shows are at significant risk of poor lifetime outcomes, and an intervention that is well supported by evidence.

The program design also reflects current evidence about the practices and approaches that are most effective in:

- Building trusting relationships with families
- Being responsive to their individual circumstances and priorities
- Working with both children and families
- Enabling families to navigate the service system

The program design is also consistent with other effective models of linking families with early childhood education, like Victoria's Access to Early Learning and Tasmania's Working Together.

The Practice Manual sets out the theory and evidence that the Links to Early Learning model is based on, and interviews with staff and ECEC stakeholders indicated that those principles and approaches are consistently applied.

The design and practice has been flexible and responsive to individuals

A key feature of the design and implementation of the Links to Early Learning model is its flexibility and capacity to respond to individual needs. This responsiveness is evident in multiple ways:

- **Their initial engagement with families:** Intake processes focus on the needs, priorities and aspirations of each family.
- **The intensity of support provided:** Families receive a different level of support depending on their level of need.
- **The families they work with:** Links to Early Learning connect with and support families other agencies can't, especially refugee and asylum seeker communities.
- **Where funding was directed:** Brokerage funds were spent on a variety of issues, clearly reflecting different types of need – including ECEC bonds, appointments with paediatricians for developmental assessments, treatment for nits, clothes and groceries.
- **How their stakeholders felt:** ECEC services expressed strong levels of confidence in the ability of the Links to Early Learning team to work through any challenge they were experiencing with a family.
- **How they talk about their work:** Interviews with Linkers demonstrated their in-depth knowledge of families, their circumstances and priorities.

"If we had a challenge with a family, we could just call Links and they would help sort it out." - ECEC service

The capability of the team has been central to the program's impact

The skills, mindsets and networks of the Links to Early Learning team underpin its effectiveness.

ECEC specialists: Staff are all trained as early childhood teachers or educators, meaning they have experience working in ECEC services and have expertise in child development. ECEC services stated that Linkers' knowledge of ECEC and their ability to "understand our context" and "be on the same page" made a significant difference.

Relationship-builders: Staff are all skilled at relationship-building and fostering trust with families – which is a precondition for success but also particularly challenging with families who have experienced trauma, have been let down by the service system, or are sensitive to stigma. ECEC services commented that Linkers often "shared their trust" with teachers and educators, enabling them to build their own relationships with families.

Networks and innovation: The pre-existing networks of the Linkers meant they knew where to go, who to speak to, and what resources were available – particularly for children with disabilities, children at risk of harm, and for high quality ECEC services. Linkers showed an ability to think creatively, be adaptive, seek advice and create new solutions. This is particularly evident in the collaboration with services and local government to secure free places for refugee and asylum seeker children, but also in the different ways they worked with families, depending on their needs, preferences and priorities.

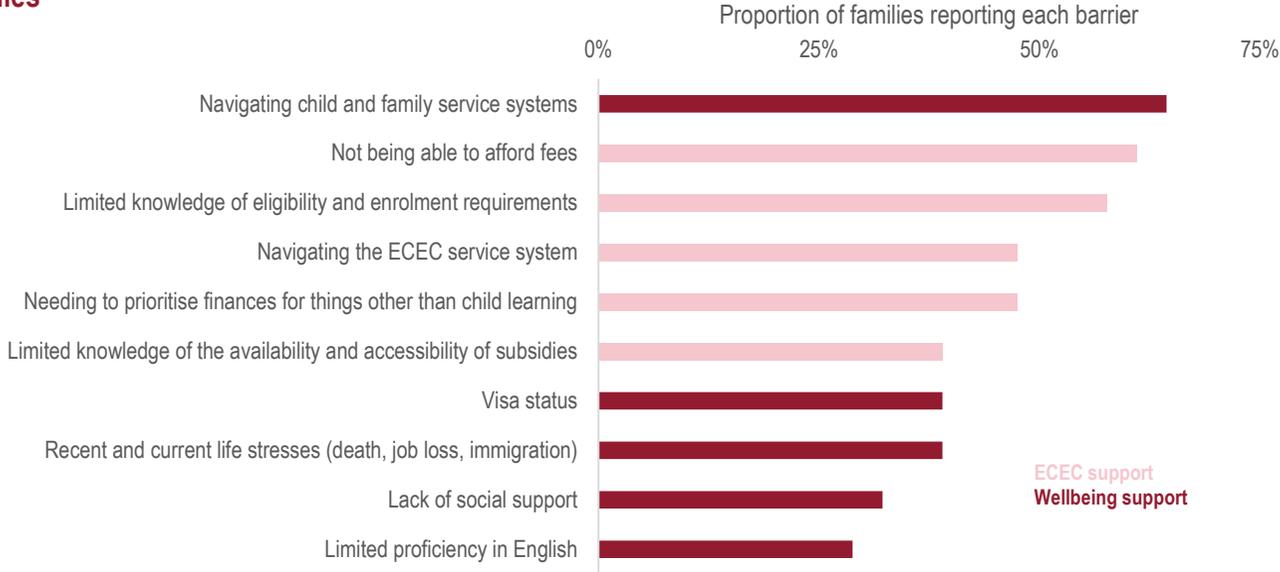
Collaboration and teamwork: The Links to Early learning team appeared to have strong cohesion, significant trust in their leadership and a strong skills mix.

Addressing barriers to access

All families in Links to Early Learning experience multiple barriers to access. The most common barriers faced are related to access to support, the complexity of the ECEC system and complex life circumstances.

Links to Early Learning has been systematically tracking the range of barriers experienced by families accessing ECEC over the last year.

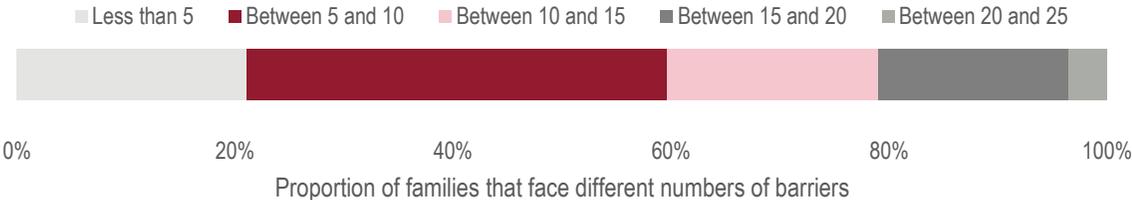
Navigating and understanding the social service system and the ECEC system are key barriers for most families*



The key barriers fall within three themes

- Access to support**
Knowing where and how to access support services.
- Navigating the ECEC system**
Being able to afford fees, understanding eligibility for services and knowing what services are available.
- Complex life circumstances**
Coping with issues like recent life stresses, social isolation, being on a temporary protection visa and having limited English.

Over 75% of families experience more than 5 barriers to accessing early learning*



*Note – barriers were only collected in the new Client Register (March 2020-21) and data is provided for 57 families.

Impacts on family confidence and wellbeing

Links to Early Learning responds effectively to key barriers to children's attendance at early learning – building families' understanding of the ECEC system, their ability to find and then trust a service to care for their children, their confidence in working through any challenges with a service, and addressing the often complex life circumstances that make regular attendance at early learning difficult.

Trust in Linkers

We found consistent evidence about the quality of the relationships Linkers build with families, reflected in:

- How Linkers talk about how they build relationships and the value they place on this
- Feedback from ECEC services
- Reflections from families from the previous evaluation

"[The family] know I'm only ever a phone call away if they need me." - Linker

"We have a family that had twins, but we didn't have anyone that spoke their language and we found it hard to communicate. Links helped to develop the relationship with the dad. They weren't even answering our calls, but they would pick up the phone for Links."

The dad trusted the Links staff, that helped our teacher to forge the relationship with the dad, and now it's strong and functioning really well. When the family trusts Links, and Links trust the centre, then the family trusts the centre" - Centre Director

Sustained relationships with ECEC services

Centre Directors consistently reported that Links to Early Learning played a significant role in effectively connecting families with ECEC services, responding early if families disengage, and equipping families to be confident participants in their local service.

"Links brings the family to the service, they prompt the family on the questions to ask, they listen to what the family wants and communicates that to us. They sit and fill out the enrolment forms with the family. So the family can clarify and ask questions. The families get a good understanding of our centre because of the support of the Linkers." - Centre Director

"The family had been through a lot of trauma, and separation was a huge challenge. The child really struggled with separation from mum. Mum was overloaded with dealing with the family's challenges."

We used that relationship with the Links team, and eventually we were able to support mum to drop the child off. The Links team convinced mum to keep him in early learning for another year of preschool."

It's made all the difference. The child is able to separate now, and now the family has another child enrolled in childcare. Mum feels more confident, she is now involved with the centre, will give feedback to us and share information." - Centre Director

Broader impacts for families

We heard about a broad range of impacts, including:

- Parents being able to start or sustain work
- Reducing social isolation
- Ensuring children get the developmental assessments they need
- Supporting families to acknowledge and understand that their children have additional needs
- Referrals to family support services

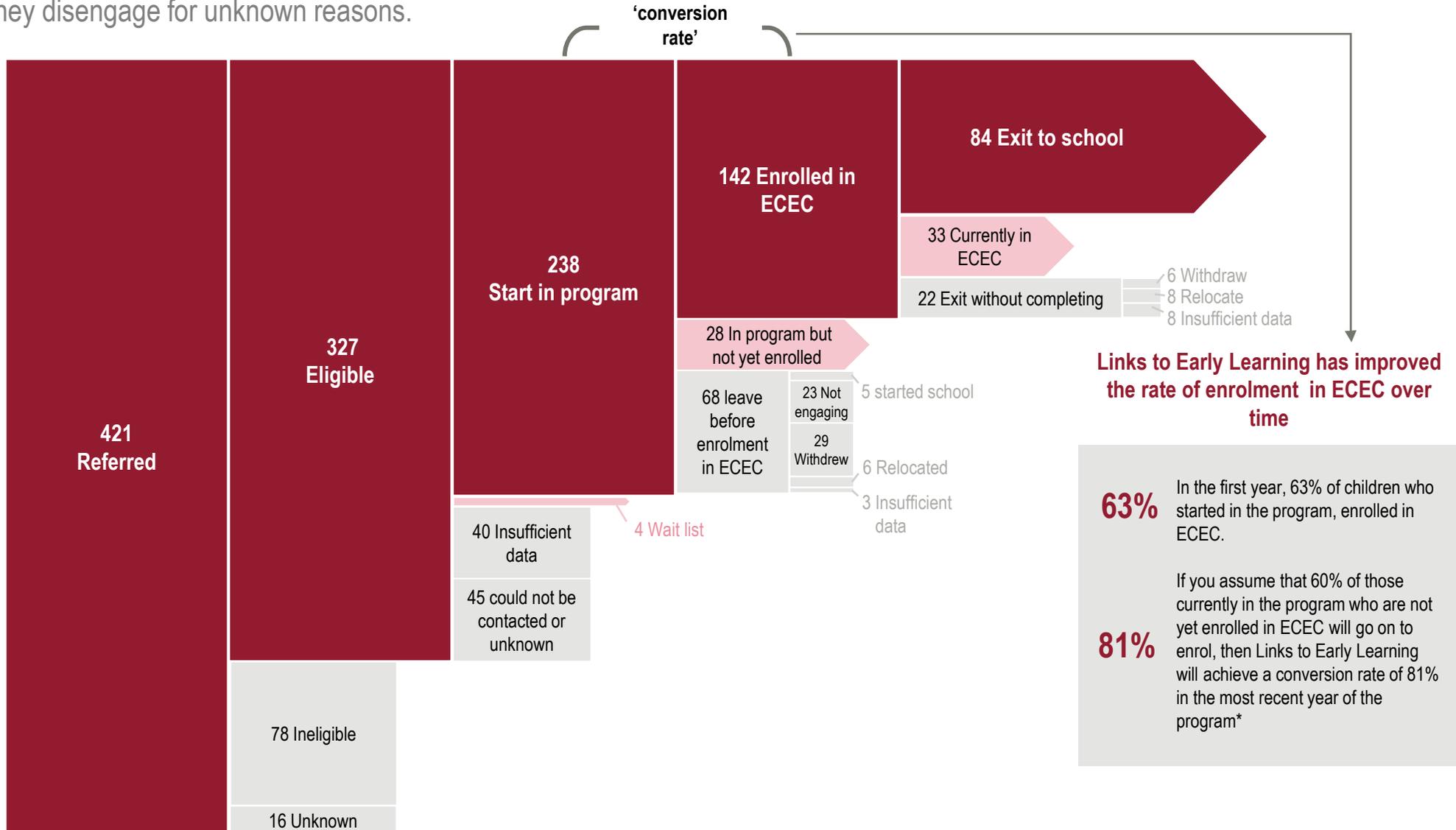
"In one family both children have autism, both quite severe. That family in particular would not have come, they wouldn't have been able to come for a number of reasons: the severity of the autism, the challenge of language barriers and their social isolation. They are doing really well now and it's made such a difference to the family." - Centre Director

"We have a new mum, she rang me the day after I met her, bawling her eyes out. She said 'I just wanted to say thank you, I spent two hours after you left yesterday crying, I was just so grateful to find you. I didn't know how to start, I felt really overwhelmed, I didn't know how I was going to do it.'" - Linker

"The centre is the hub of their social network. The children have then been invited to birthday parties, such a major breakthrough!" - Linker

Family engagement in Links to Early Learning

Over the last three years, 238 families have engaged with Links to Early Learning. 142 of these families were successfully enrolled in ECEC. Families exit the program due to relocation, withdrawing – often because they no longer need support – or they disengage for unknown reasons.



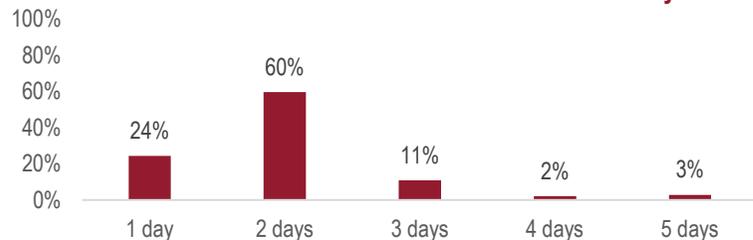
Note: diagram is to scale.

*Links to Early Learning has improved their data collection practices over the course of the pilot. Where this diagram depicts insufficient data, most of the data gaps were from 2018 and 2019.

Impacts on attendance

142 Links to Early Learning children are now enrolled in ECEC. This is 63% of the families who start in the program, rising to 81% in the most recent year. Two thirds of children are enrolled for two days or more. Qualitative evidence suggests that a large proportion of these families would not have accessed ECEC without Links to Early Learning, and those who start in ECEC are attending regularly and stay until school entry.

Two thirds of children are enrolled for one or two days



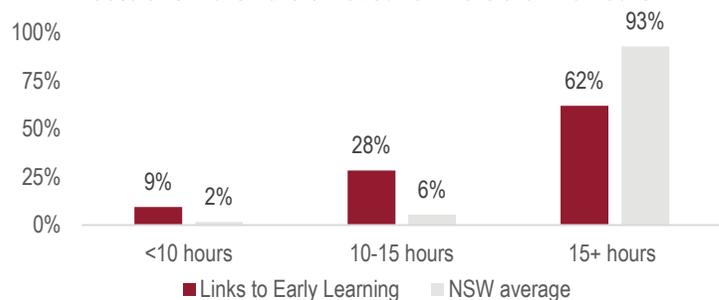
73% of children are enrolled for two days or more.

In NSW, 14% of children aged 0-5 attending long day care are enrolled for one day, 35% for two days and 48% for three or more.*

We do not have data on actual attendance.

"The families that Links refer were really difficult to engage with, without the additional support of the Linker, they wouldn't have accessed ECEC." - Centre Director

90% of children are enrolled for more than 10 hours



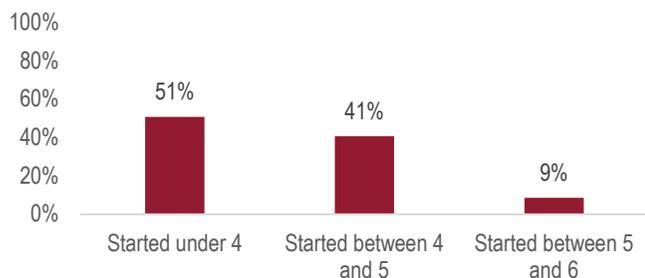
28% are enrolled for 10-15 hours.

62% are enrolled for 15 hours or more.

This remains significantly below the state average,** although without Links to Early Learning it is likely that the majority of these children would not have attended at all.

"When a family stops attending, Links helps the family to re-enter and reengage. Links are able to know what the issue is when there is a drop in attendance. There's a lot going on for us at the Centre. At most we will maybe have time for a phone call. Links can have that deeper level of engagement, figure out why the family stops attending." - Centre Director

51% of children enrol at age 3



51% of children are starting ECEC at age 3, giving them the opportunity for two years of ECEC before school.

66% of 3 year olds in NSW are enrolled in ECEC, and 92% in the year before school.**

A number of Links to Early Learning children are only enrolling part way through the year before school, however.

"Without Links, the family would not have gone to quality ECEC. They were asylum seekers so the financial barrier was the big thing. So removing that was the largest impact" - Centre Director

"Links families are staying at the Centre for their whole preschool year, more so than our other families because this is a very transient area" - Centre Director

*ABS, 2017, Childhood Education and Care, Australia

**ABS, 2020, Report on Government Services, Early Childhood Education and Care

Impacts on school readiness

Links to Early Learning prioritises access to high quality ECEC services, but policy settings make it challenging to ensure children are consistently attending the optimum number of hours over the year or two before school. There is a trade-off between enrolling many children at a lower 'dose' of ECEC, or working with fewer children but being able to pay for at least two days of ECEC.

Factors that underpin the impact of preschool on children's outcomes

Attending a high quality ECEC program...

Linkers make a significant effort to place children in services that are Meeting or Exceeding the National Quality Standard (NQS).

They draw on their knowledge of the local service system to prioritise services known to be high quality, and often leverage their relationships to secure places. Occasionally lower quality services are the only ones available, however.

The data shows that 51% of children attend services that are Exceeding the NQS, an impressive figure given only 26% of services in NSW are rated as Exceeding. Only 7% of children attend services that are Working Towards the NQS.

... at least two days per week and ideally more for disadvantaged children

Linkers attempt to enrol children for two days a week, but experience significant challenges with the existing Child Care Subsidy funding model and with NSW not funding preschool programs in long day care.

A high proportion of their families are only eligible for one day of subsidised ECEC per week, and long day care services are the only option for many of their families.

Links to Early Learning's current model does not include covering fees for all families (although it does for some, or temporarily in some circumstances). However, they have secured commitment from a number of services to provide free places for refugee and asylum seeker children.

62% of children are enrolled for at least 15 hours. Children attending less than 15 hours may not be receiving a sufficient 'dose' of ECEC to have enduring effects. Qualitative feedback suggests once children are enrolled, they attend regularly.

... for at least the year before school and ideally two years before

Linkers prioritise children in the year before school who are not attending ECEC, with the intention that they experience some preschool before starting school.

Around 51% of children start ECEC when they are 3, giving them the potential to receive two years of ECEC before school.

"We are definitely noticing a big change in the children" - Centre Director

"They are much more ready for school, and we are seeing the gaps reducing" - Centre Director

"We are proud of the improvements we're seeing in the child. At the start, she didn't speak much English. She is much more confident, and can express her feelings more openly. Emotional wellbeing is the biggest change we noticed, even with her family. At the start, mum didn't like to communicate with our educators. But she came to the parent-teacher meeting, and now she's much more open to coming to the centre. The parent-teacher meeting was a breakthrough." - Centre Director

Recommendations

Our analysis of Links to Early Learning is positive. Our recommendations cover considerations to maintain its effectiveness and grow its impact. The key tension for Uniting to manage, particularly in the context of any future scale up, is balancing flexibility and responsiveness with a manageable scope.



Maintain the flexibility

The flexibility of the model is a key strength and driver for impact. This flexibility allows Links to Early Learning to work with a diverse cohort of families, and particularly to work with families that other services cannot (like asylum seekers).

Recommendation 1: The flexibility of Links to Early Learning is a product of the design of the model, the capabilities and mindset of the team, and the authorising environment provided by leadership. These factors should be maintained and reinforced.

Consider the trade-offs of breadth versus depth

Links to Early Learning faces a challenging trade-off between breadth and depth – in terms of catchment size, eligibility criteria and whether it is better to support a small amount of ECEC for many children or invest in a larger dose for a smaller number of children. The intentionally broad catchment and eligibility criteria of the pilot provides flexibility. It gives Links to Early Learning access to a large and diverse pool of potential families, the ability to be inclusive rather than exclude families, the opportunity to work across different contexts in various suburbs and LGAs, and the capacity to respond to opportunities (like the partnership with Canterbury Bankstown council to provide free places for families from refugee and asylum seeker communities – see page 38).

At the same time, working across such a large area increases the number and diversity of referral partners and ECEC services. This potentially dilutes Links to Early Learning's capacity to work on service, sector and system capacity building. It may also make it challenging to build the deep connections in particular communities that would help pick up families who are disconnected from the service system and potentially in greatest need.

Equally, there is a trade-off between enrolling many children for the one day they can afford, or fewer children and paying for additional days, and between intensive work with each family versus working with many families. The similar programs that appear to enrol a higher proportion of their families in ECEC tended to have smaller sites and fewer families per site, and preschool attendance was free for families. Breadth versus depth will be a key consideration for scaling the Links to Early Learning model.

Recommendation 2: Consider carefully the trade-offs and risks associated with further expanding the catchment area and eligibility criteria, and explore whether a consolidation or a narrowing of focus may be an effective way to maximise impact.

Monitor the 'conversion rate'

Compared with other similar programs, it appears that a smaller proportion of Links to Early Learning families who are engaged in the program go on to enrol their children in ECEC. There could be a number of reasons for this – including significant policy and funding differences across the jurisdictions and differences in data collection. The current data does not provide a full picture of why families might not be engaging in the program, and a more in-depth understanding would be valuable.

Recommendation 3: Focus on understanding the drivers of families dropping out of the program and consider whether any changes need to be made to the model.

Recommendations - continued



Actively manage key person risks

The skills and capabilities of the team – including the diversity of experience and strengths of the networks among the staff – appear to have been a key contributor to Links to Early Learning’s effectiveness. While there was and is a strong focus on capacity building and sharing knowledge and key relationships, dependence on individual skills and networks could be a risk for Links to Early Learning. It should also be a key consideration for future scale-up.

- Links to Early Learning should ensure effective processes for succession planning, ongoing skill development and ensuring key contacts and relationships are shared across team members.



Dial up advocacy and systemic change

Links to Early Learning is a targeted and intensive model addressing a key gap in the current service system – and as such, it is unlikely to ever meet the full scope of unmet need in the community. Many of the issues it focuses on are the product of known issues with the design and functioning of the early childhood education funding and delivery model, and would be substantively resolved through policy change. Links to Early Learning has important insights into the specific challenges faced by families, and specific policy changes that could make a real difference. It may also be the case that Links to Early Learning has a greater impact by leveraging its expertise to build capacity and reduce local barriers to access, and the balance between direct work with families and broader capacity-building should be carefully navigated.

- Links to Early Learning should seek opportunities to contribute data and case studies to support advocacy, working with peak bodies and others to highlight the issue and put forward clear solutions to current system design issues.
- Consideration should be given to the balance of effort between direct work with families and addressing local barriers to access.



Strengthen how data is collected and used

Links to Early Learning has solid data collection practices that have improved greatly, particularly with the introduction of a comprehensive and granular Client Register. The specificity of the data collected has improved over time, as the service model has evolved and as part of the adaptive approach to the pilot. Additional work to improve the consistency of data collection, and ensuring continuity of data collection, would strengthen the utility of the data collected. We have experienced challenges analysing the data, with some instances of gaps and inconsistencies and Linkers have experienced technical challenges inputting and managing data. While Linkers appear to engage in reflection routinely, they do not appear to often use the data they collect and at times, there were gaps between the perception of Linkers and the evidence in the data. Learning from the data, using it as a tool to reflect on practice and make decisions about prioritisation would be valuable.

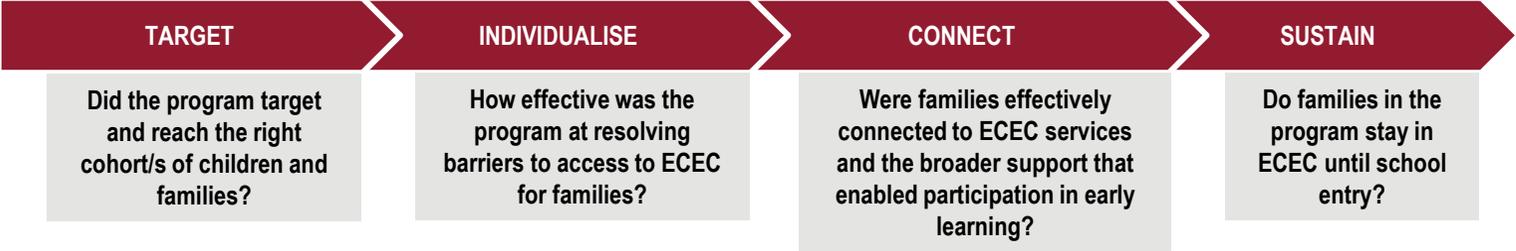
- A dedicated resource to support the team to collect, analyse and reflect on the data would be valuable, particularly in the context of any scale up. This would set them up to understand and improve their impact.

Evaluation approach

Evaluation approach

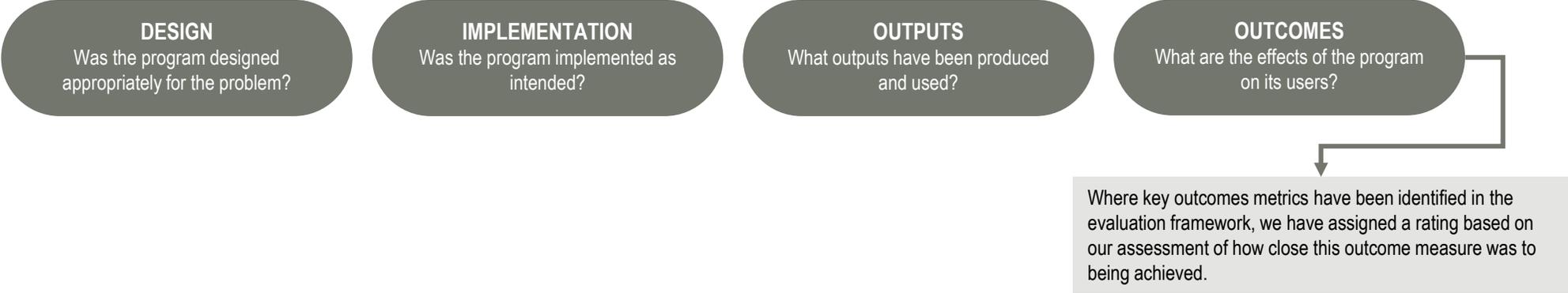
Our evaluation is structured around the key stages in Links to Early Learning’s theory of change. It addresses each of the key evaluation questions set out in the evaluation framework (see Appendix A).

Links to Early Learning Theory of Change



 The top right corner of each slide indicates which aspects of the evaluation we are conveying

Paul Ramsay Foundation Evaluation Framework



TARGET

Eligibility for Links to Early Learning

Links to Early Learning addresses a genuine gap in the service system, targets a wide but appropriate cohort of children and families, and uses evidence-based strategies to reach families.

The program intends to enable children in South Western Sydney who currently miss out on ECEC to attend high quality early childhood education in the year or two before school.

Targeting a clear gap and area of need

A high percentage of children are developmentally vulnerable in Links to Early Learning's catchment area and a significant number of children are not engaging in ECEC. For example, in Bankstown and Liverpool 23.5% of children are developmentally vulnerable compared with 19% in the rest of NSW. The program targeted a well defined and evidence-based area of need. Through their broader work in the community, Uniting had identified a significant gap, with few other services providing support for families trying to navigate a complex early childhood education system. The strong response from referral agencies indicates that this was a genuine gap in the service system.

Targeting children who would not otherwise access ECEC

Eligibility criteria were intentionally broad at the beginning, as it was not known at the outset what cohorts had the greatest need, where Links to Early Learning could have the biggest impact, and how best to prioritise.

Rather than defining what cohorts they would work with, they focused on children not attending any ECEC – prioritising both children in the year before school and children experiencing multiple risk factors. The initial focus was only on 4-year-olds but an early decision was made to also include younger children – reflecting both local needs and the evidence on early participation in ECEC. The Links team thought they might refine the eligibility criteria through the course of the pilot and shift their approach to particular cohorts, but came to believe that the breadth of their eligibility criteria was one of their strengths.

The initial intention was to target a relatively small area, but the number of suburbs and LGAs in scope has grown through the course of the project. At times, this has been in response to need (i.e. areas where there are high numbers of asylum seekers) but in one instance they added a whole additional LGA because a local council they had a good partnership with merged with another council. There is limited data on the families who are ineligible, but the available data indicates a number had already found childcare by the time Linkers got in touch and several had children who were too young.

Appropriate strategies for reaching the target cohort

The Links to Early Learning team appears to have drawn on a combination of evidence, practice experience and collaboration within their extensive networks to develop strategies to reach the families they were targeting.

They prioritised developing broad referral pathways that spanned universal services (like maternal and child health and schools) and specialist services (like asylum seeker / refugee services), leveraging existing relationships with families. They also ensured they had access to translators and multi-lingual marketing material that reflected the cultural and linguistic diversity of the cohorts they were aiming to target.

“The definition of who is eligible to access Links to Early Learning is broad enough to ensure that no child ‘slips through the cracks’.”

Links to Early Learning Practice Manual

“Without Links, it would have been extremely difficult for us to get children into childcare. We wouldn’t be in a position to help the family to enrol. There are some parent support services available, but they don’t specialise in childcare. We did tell one parent support service that childcare was really important for the child, but they didn’t see ECEC as their role. That gap wouldn’t have been filled if it wasn’t for Uniting.” – Referrer

Strategies for engaging families

With over 400 referrals across the three years, Links to Early Learning’s strategies to engage families appear to have been effective. The program has changed its approach over time and focused on the activities that have been most effective.

Building and adapting referral pathways

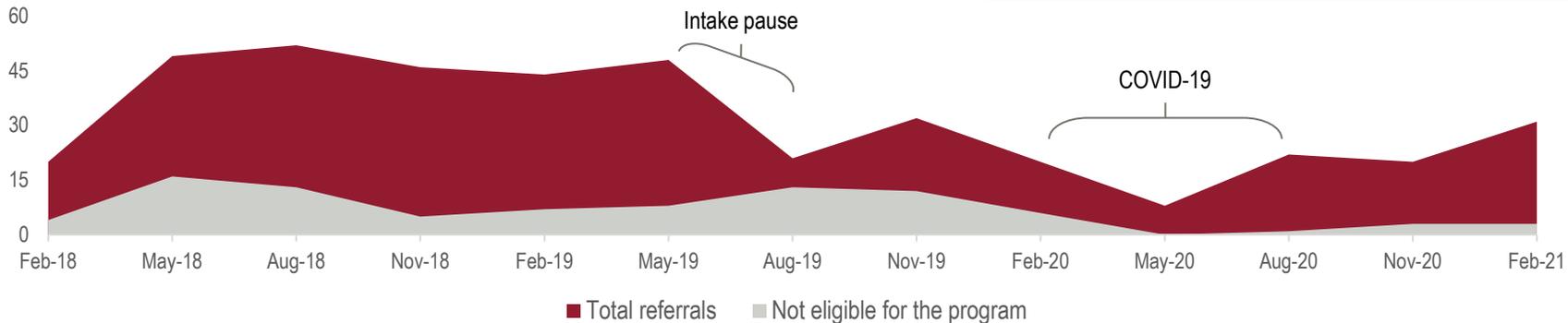
Initially, the team worked on building broad referral pathways into the program, with the intention that other services and workers in the community would identify families with an interest in ECEC or a clear need for access and connect them with Links. The staff had worked in Western Sydney for many years and had extensive networks – particularly in disability services and child protection – which they drew on.

The team spent a significant proportion of their time building awareness of the program with local services, attending community events for families to promote early learning, and joining a number of local early years networks. This effort resulted in a significant growth in referrals over the first year – to the point that the team was overwhelmed and it was necessary to pause intake.

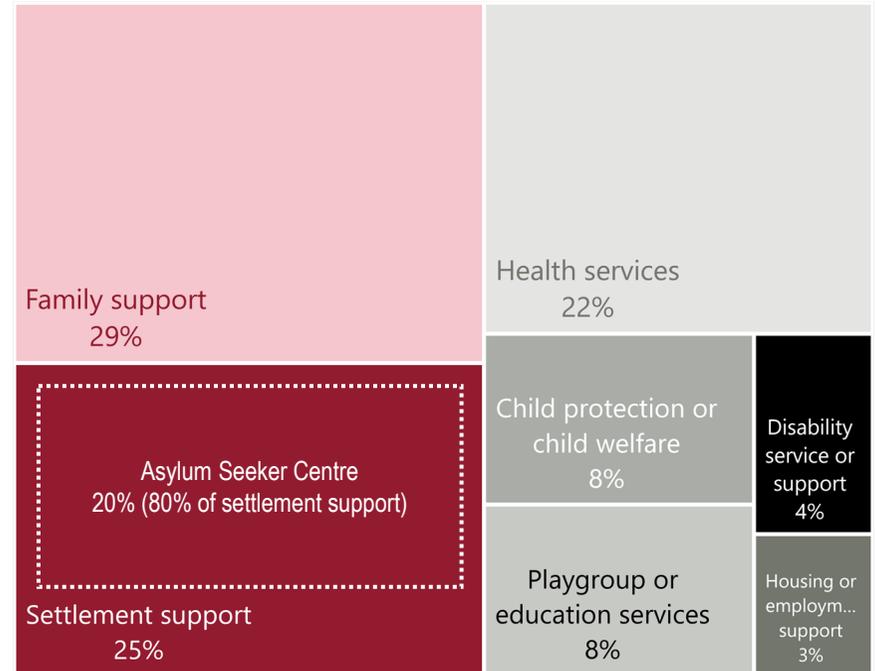
They were also receiving a high proportion of referrals where the family were ineligible for the program (children were too young or they lived out of area) or had misaligned expectations (including that the program would cover their ECEC fees). Over time, they have focused on educating referrers about the program and about early learning, and focused more on high-value partnerships than broad-based engagement. They have also stopped attending community events as this was not proving effective. There has been a steady reduction in ineligible referrals over the last year as a result. COVID-19 also led to a general drop in referrals.

Nearly 95% of families in the program have come via a referral partner, and referrals come from a range of sectors and services – from universal services like playgroups, health services and schools through to specialist services like family support, child protection and housing.

Quarterly referrals into Links to Early Learning 2018-2021



Half of all referrals come from family support and settlement services, with 20% of all referrals coming from the Asylum Seeker Centre



Characteristics of families engaged in the program

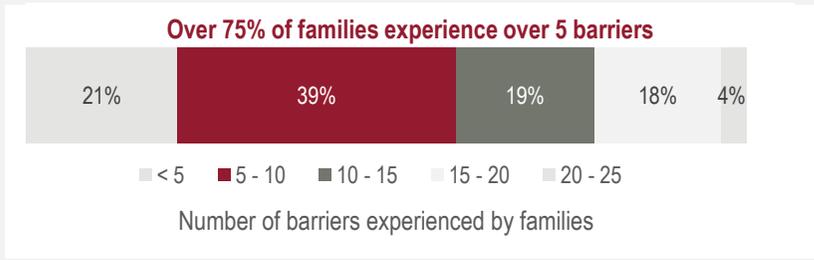


Links to Early Learning has clearly reached significant numbers of families who are not accessing ECEC and are experiencing multiple and complex barriers.

Links to Early Learning has collected data on the barriers that families face and the types of disadvantages of families engaged in the program.* Interviews with Linkers and ECEC services indicate that the vast majority of families would not have attended ECEC without the support provided by Links to Early Learning.

All families engaged in the program experience multiple barriers to accessing ECEC*

Almost all children referred to the program have multiple risk factors. The issues they experience span complex life circumstances (like recent bereavements, social isolation, trauma), lack of access to broader support, and difficulty understanding and navigating the service system.



“Without Links, the family would not have gone to quality ECEC. They were asylum seekers so the financial barrier was the big thing. So removing that was the largest impact” - Centre Director

“In one family both children have autism, both quite severe. That family in particular would not have come, they wouldn't have been able to come for a number of reasons: the severity of the autism, the challenge of language barrier and their social isolation. They are doing really well now and it's made such a difference to the family.” - Centre Director

“The families that Links refer were really difficult to engage with, without the additional support of the Linker, they wouldn't have accessed ECEC.” - Centre Director

Demand has been greatest for children with a disability and families from refugee and asylum seeker communities

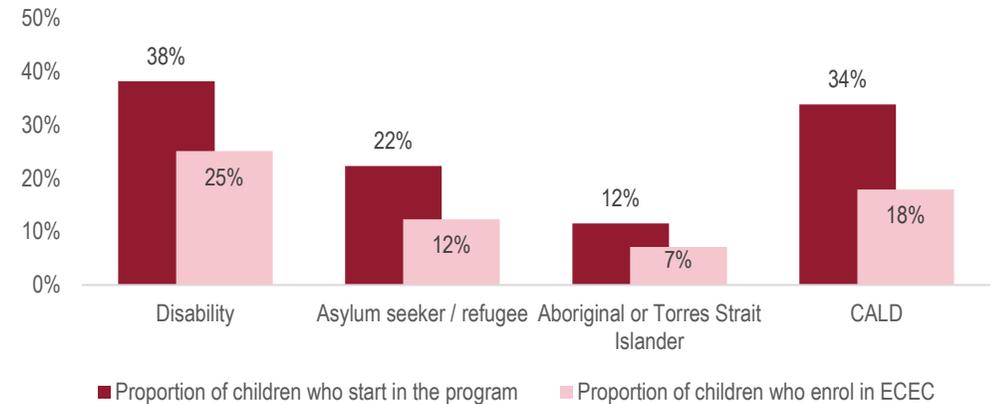
Linkers report significant barriers for children with disability, both in terms of the ability for families to trust an ECEC service, the extent to which the family is overwhelmed, and the availability of services.

Children with disabilities have the largest unsuccessful enrolment rate (13%) compared to other cohorts, largely because it is more difficult to find suitable ECEC places.

Links to Early Learning is often the only service able to work with asylum seekers and refugees, and they have no other support to access ECEC (as they are not eligible for Child Care Subsidy).

While some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have participated in Links to Early Learning, it has not been an explicit focus and would require a dedicated focus on building trust and relationships with the community.

There are high proportions of children with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and asylum seeker/refugee families engaged in the program



*Note – barriers were only collected in the new Client Register (March 2020-21) and data is provided for 57 families.

Effectiveness of targeting strategies

Links to Early Learning is targeting the right cohort of families, and the flexibility of the eligibility criteria is a strength. However, there are critical trade-offs in choosing breadth over speciality – particularly around a wide geographical footprint versus deep connections in target locations.

We make a conservative assessment that at least 80% of Links to Early Learning children would not have attended ECEC without this support. There is a strong correlation between attending preschool and reductions in developmental vulnerability, with the largest impacts for children from low socio-economic backgrounds. This indicates there is good reason to believe that targeting this cohort of children and families has made a significant contribution to improved school readiness.

Findings



Maintaining broad eligibility criteria appears to enable Links to Early Learning to reach a wide range of families who are not accessing ECEC – including families that other services cannot work with. This flexibility means the program can respond to individual families and their specific circumstances.

The broad referral pathways have been effective at channelling the target cohort into the program, and combined with the large geographic footprint, indicates they have been able to engage with many families in diverse circumstances.

One potential challenge is that almost all families who are being referred are already in contact with a service – even if only lightly. There may be a pool of families who are very socially isolated and are completely disconnected from any support. These families would be especially challenging for Links to Early Learning to connect with, but may be the cohort with the greatest need.

This is a challenging trade-off between breadth and specialisation in the way families are targeted, and there are strengths and limitations of both approaches. These must be a key consideration ahead of any future scale-up.

Opportunities and challenges associated with breadth versus specialisation

Focusing on specific cohorts or areas

- ✓ May enable deeper networks into a specific area or community and potentially find families who have greater levels of need
- ✓ May increase the proportion of families who would definitely not have had access to ECEC without support
- ✓ Allows Links to Early Learning to build expertise and relationships in the area/sector
- ✗ May reduce flexibility to be responsive to individuals or emerging areas of need

Maintaining broad focus and footprint

- ✓ Greater flexibility to respond to individual circumstances
- ✓ Reduced risk of excluding families in need because their circumstances do not match the criteria or because they are slightly outside of the target suburbs
- ✓ A larger pool of families to draw from
- ✗ Increased time and travel costs
- ✗ Reduced opportunity to build deep local networks

Outcomes in the Links to Early Learning's theory of change



Achieving

Increase the number of children attending quality early learning



Substantial progress

Increase children's readiness for school

"There are definitely families in the community we are not reaching – though we try a range of strategies" - Linker

INDIVIDUALISE

Approach to individualised responses

Links to Early Learning uses relational practice to build trust with families, which equips Linkers to identify and prioritise their individual barriers to accessing ECEC. The program's flexibility around the duration and intensity of support allows Linkers to cater to different levels of need and at the pace families are comfortable with.

Links to Early Learning's Practice Manual clearly outlines the evidence and philosophy that informs the way the program works with families. This approach is a relational, family-centred model that emphasises the priorities and preferences of each individual family, working at the family's pace and oriented around their goals. This approach is informed by evidence and aligns with good practice.

There is a clear protocol for initial visits, with two Linkers going on a home visit – the primary Linker who will lead the ongoing work with the family and a second team member. The initial intake visit includes talking to parents/carers to:

- Map the family's awareness and access of support services.
- Explore the child's development, their strengths and learning support needs.
- Identify health needs, behaviour support, or abuse or neglect; explore further about whether additional support is needed than is currently being accessed.
- Discuss barriers to early learning, what families are looking for in an ECEC centre.

"They are so professional, they know what to do with the families." - Referrer

The second Linker works with the child, using play activities to engage them and identify any developmental strengths and needs.

Linkers are expected to work flexibly, tailoring their activities and emphasis to the needs and priorities of the family. They have access to brokerage funds which can also be used flexibly.

"They are great to work with. Links to Early Learning do home visits, and when visiting people at their homes, you can see more, and understand the whole story of the family. That's the good thing of Links to Early Learning. They build more trust" - Referrer

"We are pretty good at relationships. Everyone on the team has good people skills. There are a few families that are hesitant and you do the 'softly softly' approach, sometimes it might take a few months. Sometimes they are really nervous, and might think we are child protection but once they realise we are [there for them], they are much more open to us" - Linker

"Definitely 10 on the scale - a dream to work with. We know that they will do what they can to help any family we refer. They help financially and with emotional support and extend the help in other areas. They aren't rigid with respect to the help that they give." - Referrer

Strategies for tailored responses

Linkers clearly have an authorising environment as well as the mindsets, skills and structures that support them to adapt and respond to family priorities. This flexibility is a core contributor to the program’s impact.

Linkers appear to consistently apply the program’s practice principles, with evident skill in adapting to families, understanding their contexts and tailoring their style and approach to the family. Interviews with Linkers and ECEC services provide numerous examples of individualised responses, including:

- Supporting children with separation anxiety by staying with them at the centre for an hour or two, for their first few months, until they are settled.
- Meeting regularly with families for as long as it takes for them to feel comfortable and confident attending an ECEC service.
- Attending appointments with families when they are anxious about going on their own.
- Using brokerage funding for a pram, clothes and groceries so a family could get to their local ECEC service with children clothed and fed.
- Helping families recognise, understand and feel comfortable with a child’s diagnosis.
- Meeting families at a café or park rather than at home, when it is the family’s preference.
- Providing referrals and advice for older siblings, like local homework programs, connections to local schools, or holiday programs.
- A growing focus on supporting transition to school, especially for children with disability.

In the most recent 12 months, an average of 80% of referrals were taken up, which reflects the effort Linkers put into making thoughtful referrals and supporting families to attend appointments.

Intensity of support is linked to project stage and level of need

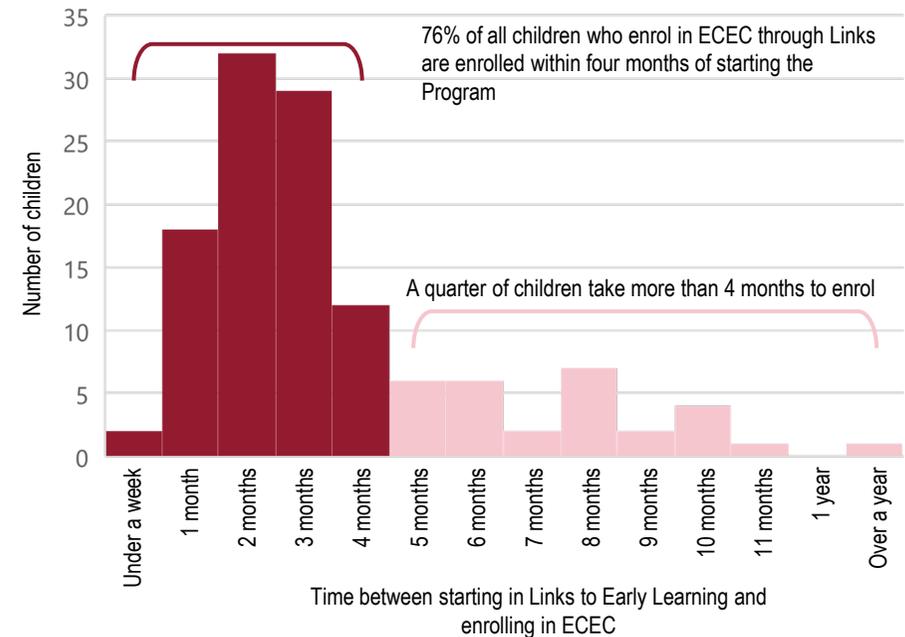
At the first visit, families are assessed as Lite, Standard or Plus – reflecting the anticipated hours per week that will be required. Currently, there is a relative balance of intensity levels across the cohort, but as it is the start of the year more than half of families are at the initial visit and relationship-building stage.

Families engaged in the program*	Lite	Standard	Plus	Total
Stage 1: Initial visit and relationship building	31%	15%	9%	55%
Stage 2: Addressing barriers to enrolment	8%	14%	20%	42%
Stage 3: Sustaining attendance	1%	1%	1%	3%
Total	40%	29%	31%	100%

Linkers noted that one of the distinguishing features of their model is their flexibility to adjust the intensity and time needed for each family.

- They can work with families for as long as it takes for them to be comfortable enrolling children (particularly for parents of children with disability or those who have experienced trauma) or until a suitable place becomes available (especially for children with disability, who often struggle to find a place)
- They have the capacity to work with families over multiple years and until children are enrolled in school, as active and ongoing follow-up is built into the model.

While most families are enrolled in ECEC within four months, Linkers work with some families for over a year



*Note – stages and intensity of support classifications were only recorded in the new Client Register (March 2020-21)

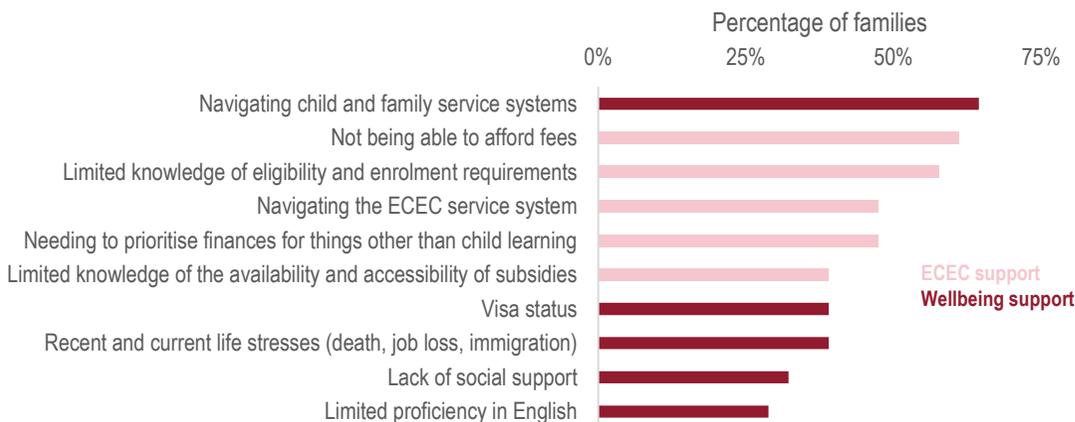
Individualised activities



The families that Links to Early Learning works with experience a broad range of challenges, and all have complex life circumstances. The model provides the flexibility to enable a genuinely individualised response, through identifying then addressing barriers on a case-by-case basis.

Links to Early Learning has identified and tracked over 70 different barriers and challenges for families

The 10 most common barriers that families experience



The most frequent barriers faced by families span three themes

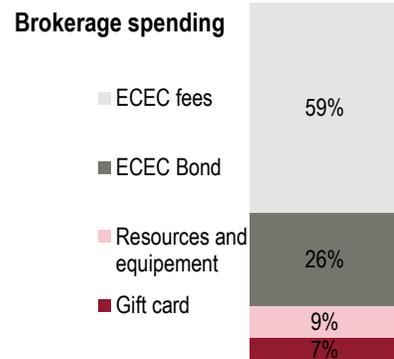
- Access to support**
Knowing where and how to access support services
- Navigating the ECEC system**
Being able to afford fees, understand eligibility for services and know what services are available
- Complex life circumstances**
Coping with issues like recent life stresses, social isolation, being on a temporary protection visa and having limited English.

Links to Early Learning’s core areas of focus align with and address the 10 most common barriers faced by families:

1. ECEC support: Support to choose an ECEC service, assistance with enrolment, targeted fee relief

Linkers use their knowledge and networks to place families in centres that reflect family priorities. For example, knowing which centres have educators that speak a family’s first language.

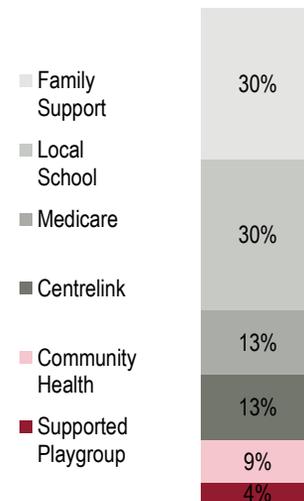
A large proportion of their brokerage support goes to paying bonds (up front payments beyond the reach of many families), plus targeted and usually temporary fee relief.



2. Wellbeing support: Referrals to other support and services and relational practice that builds trust and engagement

Linkers refer out to a variety of different services based on the needs of the family and, when needed, will attend with the family as additional support.

Percentage of successfully attended referrals



*Note – barriers were only collected in the new Client Register (March 2020-21). Data on barriers presented here is based on a subset of the total number of families in the program (57 families for whom there is relevant data).

Effectiveness of individualised responses

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

The flexibility that Links to Early Learning provides to tailor responses to family needs appears to be highly effective, and should be upheld.

The individualised responses of the Linkers appear highly effective in increasing families' confidence to access ECEC services.

While we do not have direct evidence of changes in family wellbeing, we heard numerous examples of families receiving support that reduced their stress, increased their social connections, gave them access to financial resources and connected them to much needed support (outlined in the next section). There is good reason to believe this would contribute to improvements in their wellbeing.

Case study

We worked with one family for two and a half years. A single dad with two girls, who had to leave his home in country NSW and come to Sydney. He had experienced family violence and had an order against his former partner.

He had a good network in his home town, but no support in Sydney – and he didn't want to share his story and ask for help. He didn't have any clothes for the children, no furniture, and didn't know where to start. We helped him buy clothes for the girls, we helped him fill in all the Centrelink forms, and paid his bond. The eldest girl is now in school and the little one is in preschool.

Trust was so important with this dad. He was very guarded, but we built trust by being honest, clear about what we could and couldn't help with, and we never let him down. We also gave him a lot of respect. We are the contact point for the centre if there are any issues, and he gets in touch when he needs help. - Linker

Progress towards outcomes in the Links to Early Learning's theory of change



Achieving

Increase families' knowledge and confidence in ECEC and understanding of its role supporting children's development



Substantial progress

Increase family wellbeing and reduce underlying barriers to ECEC participation



Findings

The flexibility that is built into the Links to Early Learning model, combined with the skills and mindsets of the team, underpins its success.

Linkers appear to hold appropriate boundaries around their work and manage the risk of overcommitting or moving into areas other organisations and specialists are better equipped to provide. They appear to keep a consistent focus on enrolment in ECEC services while also providing broader support.

The flexibility of the model should be upheld and continued, but with ongoing monitoring to ensure the focus is maintained.

CONNECT

Connect: Design

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

The design of strategies to connect families to ECEC services, and to link them with broader support, is comprehensive and aligned with the evidence about what works. However, we found Links to Early Learning had less of a focus on strategies to improve the capacity of ECEC services, largely reflecting the limits of the team's time, capacity and resourcing.

Connecting families to ECEC services

The design of the Linker role is strong and addresses known boundaries to enrolment in ECEC:

- **Understanding family priorities:** Focusing on supporting families to identify their priorities and helping them understand the value of early learning – increases the likelihood of sustaining participation.
- **Understanding the options and prioritising quality:** Working with families to visit different services, equip them to ask questions and highlight the example of good practice – building the capacity of families, increasing their understanding of how ECEC services work and what to look for in terms of quality.
- **Taking care of administration:** Resolving administrative barriers, from obtaining birth certificates to enrolment forms to Child Care Subsidy applications – ensuring paperwork does not get in the way of enrolment.
- **Supporting settling in:** Ensuring children have the clothes, shoes, and equipment they need and assisting children and families with separation stresses.

All Linkers are trained early childhood teachers or educators, ensuring they have the necessary knowledge of how ECEC services operate, how the funding models work, and the skills to navigate the complexity. The process for connecting families and services is comprehensively documented in the Practice Manual.

"There are more families in my service that could use their support. We are here to educate children, we don't have the time or staff to offer more support to families." - Centre Director

"It's important that we have that credibility [of being early childhood-trained] and the same outlook, so we know the demands of centres and what it's like 'on the ground.'" - Linker

Connecting families to broader support

The core focus of the model on both children's access to ECEC and addressing broader family needs reflects the evidence around 'two-gen' models that work with children and their families.*

The approach to connecting families to support is clearly outlined in the Practice Guide, with the protocol for an initial visit including identification of areas of need for the child, parents/carers (and other siblings, at times), and determining family priorities. This strengths-based, family-led approach aligns with best practice.

Improving the capacity of ECEC services

The aspiration of the program is to support services to work effectively with families experiencing vulnerability – including understanding the impact of trauma.

We saw less explicit focus on designing activities to achieve service capacity building, and these activities appear to be more opportunistic and occur via role-modelling and other opportunities for influence. Working with ECEC services is not included in the Practice Manual.

Linkers expressed interest in increasing their focus on service capacity building, and identified time constraints and reluctance on the part of ECEC services as the main limiting factors. The choice to hire early childhood teachers and educators also reflects Links to Early Learning's interest in influencing the capacity of ECEC services, and means it is well positioned to expand this focus.

*For example, see: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>

Connecting families to ECEC services

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

Linkers are highly effective at connecting families with ECEC services. Their expertise as early childhood teachers and educators appears to underpin their effectiveness and drive their focus on ensuring they enrol children in high quality ECEC services. Centres highly value the support they provide.

Connecting families to ECEC services

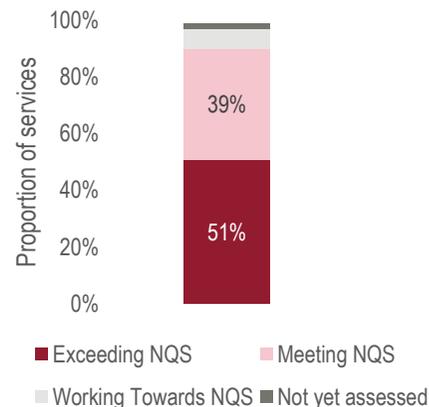
Connecting families with services is a core focus for Links to Early Learning staff. The early childhood training of Linkers was identified by ECEC staff and the Linkers themselves central to their effectiveness. This gives them a comprehensive understanding of the complex ECEC system, which:

- Helps build trust with the centres and staff
- Enables them to find centres that align with family preferences
- Encourages centres to prioritise Links to Early Learning's children
- Helps families understand play-based learning

90% of the services that Links to Early Learning children attend either meet or exceed the National Quality Standard (NQS)

The early childhood expertise in the team also meant they were equipped to identify and prioritise high quality services – with 90% of children attending centres that were Meeting or Exceeding the NQS.

51% of children attended Exceeding services, when only 26% of NSW services overall exceed the NQS.



"Links brings the family to the service, they prompt the family on the questions to ask, they listen to what the family wants and communicates that to us. They sit and fill out the enrolment forms with the family. So the family can clarify and ask questions. The families get a good understanding of our centre because of the support of the Linkers." - Centre Director

"There was one case where we were looking for a really specialised service, for a child with disability. We were able to get the child in because of Links' networks in ECEC.

They were able to negotiate to get the child in, they called at the right time, they could follow up. If it wasn't for Links the family wouldn't have gotten in to that specialised service.

It's been so good for the family, we were over the moon when we found out the child had gotten a place." – Referrer, child health

Case study

We worked with a single dad with five children. His wife was involved with drugs and left. He had no birth certificates, no immunisation records, the children weren't at school.

We wanted to get the little ones into childcare but we couldn't because he had no documentation at all. It took us 12 months to get a birth certificate, and into childcare eventually.

We used a lot of interpreters, as dad didn't read or write in English or Arabic. He's a loving dad and really grateful, he just didn't know what to do.

Now there are two kids in childcare and the other three are at school. I get updates because I know the principal, and they're doing great. - Linker

"We have a family that had twins, but we didn't have anyone that spoke their language and we found it hard to communicate. Links helped to develop the relationship with the dad. They weren't even answering our calls, but they would pick up the phone for Links.

The dad trusted the Links staff, that helped our teacher to forge the relationship with the dad, and now it's strong and functioning really well. When the family trusts Links, and Links trust the centre, then the family trusts the centre" - Centre Director

"They are specialised, they've got the knowledge we don't. They explain to us when a child is eligible for childcare or what age to send them and CCS and the ins and outs of ECEC system and the financial side of things. They also have very compassionate approach. Where there are cases we have been particularly concerned about, the family was put as a priority." – Referrer, child health

Connecting families to broader support

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

Flexibility to respond to diverse needs and circumstances means Linkers are able to work through a range of barriers and deliver the practical support families need. Securing developmental assessments for children is especially valuable, as early intervention for developmental concerns will have an enormous impact on children's readiness for school.

Links to Early Learning families were referred to a broad range of supports and services – particularly to family support services, but also to playgroup, maternal and child health services, paediatricians and other allied health specialists, NDIS, food pantries, and local schools.

- More than 55% of families are referred to additional supports or provided with brokerage funding.
- 80% of families take up referrals and attend appointments.

One significant area of focus is identifying children who may have additional needs or developmental delays and securing an assessment by a specialist. Links to Early Learning staff do this by:

- Helping families see and feel comfortable with the fact that their child may have additional needs.
- Knowing where to go for an assessment.
- Paying for an assessment if the family cannot afford one or access one another way.
- Attending appointments with them if they need support to attend.

One Linker suggested that up to a quarter of the children they work with have undiagnosed additional needs, with more prevalence in families from refugee and asylum seeker cohorts.

"One mother, she was so excited to be referred to Links. She had two children and she couldn't do anything except take care of them.

She had to go to legal appointments and do so many things. The families have to apply for protection and it's a complex system to navigate to get the visa status, so you can imagine, having to retell your trauma and your kids are with you, they are being disruptive or crying during these appointments.

Childcare meant the mum could do all the things she needed to for her protection visa, without caring (for) the children at the same time" - Referrer

"I was working with a single mother with two children, three and four years old. Because the children went to early learning centres, with the help of Links, she could do a TAFE course to learn English.

After that she could find a job, and you could see how it changed her life. She used to come every day to us to ask for help, even for food and lots of little things.

But now she found a job and can be independent, and I don't see her very much. It's so good to see how people's life changes. Once people receive the right help, they do well" - Referrer

"I didn't understand how much was available for families – until I worked here. Now I go to meetings, I discover things, and jump on it and link into them." - Linker

Improving the capacity of local services

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

In general, capacity building activities for services have not been a core priority for Links to Early Learning. Although the training it has delivered has been valued by ECEC services and has some influence, more intensive support is likely to be needed to drive significant changes in practice.

Capacity building for services was not a significant focus of the design of the model, and has been a relatively minor area of focus for the Links to Early Learning team. In spite of this, Linkers have influenced quality and capacity in a number of ways.

Prioritising quality

Linkers report that they prioritise high quality services, and only use low quality services if there are no other options – in part because lower quality services can be unwilling to participate in capacity-building activities.

Providing training

Links to Early Learning has provided free training for services working with asylum seekers – focused on understanding the refugee experience, the cultural background of these families, and the impact of trauma on children's behaviour and on how families might engage with a service.

One Centre Director commented that this had made her and her staff more sensitive to these families, and another used the resources recommended by the Linkers to adopt a range of new practices and activities with their children.

Providing resources

Links to Early Learning also supplied services with a reading program that included books and lesson plans. A number of services commented on how much access to quality learning resources had been valued, and noted that their teachers and educators had used them.

Links to Early Learning is also a member of the Early Childhood Intervention Collaboration Project working group (ECICP) which organises and delivers low cost or free training for ECE staff in South Western Sydney.

“Centre Directors loved the training. For lots of them, it was the first time they had heard about refugees and asylum seekers. We had people crying at the training (this was a good thing) and really understanding what it was to be an asylum seeker.”

The staff said doing this training made them proud to work at this organisation” - Service coordinator

“If we have a child in a centre with concerning practices or if the families aren't building good relationships with staff, it's really hard. I will sit down with staff and offer to provide them support or say 'have you thought about x', but have to be very careful and delicate. We are the outsiders and can't be seen to be coming in telling them how to do their jobs.” - Linker

“We role-model good practice for them, role-model how to work with the children. Next time you come back, check in on practice.” - Linker

“After the training, the staff are more sensitive in their interactions with children and families. Staff are more prepared for it if a child is facing difficulties at home. Their confidence has increased a bit. They are more aware of what steps to take and where help can be sought. They are less confident about establishing trusted relationships and good communication with families, but it's part of our Quality Improvement Plan.” - Centre Director

Connecting families and services

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

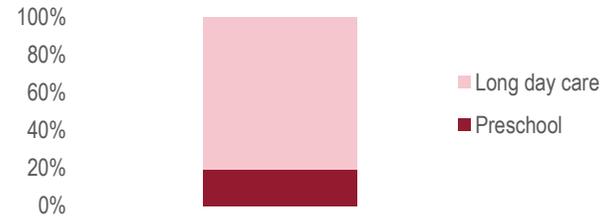
OUTCOMES

The core focus of Links to Early Learning is connecting families and ECEC services, and the program does this very effectively. A key challenge, however, is having the time and resources to work intensively with services across a vast area of South Western Sydney.

Placements in ECEC services

Links to Early Learning has connected 142 families with 42 different ECEC services across a very large catchment area. The program works across long day care services and sessional preschools, and across private, not-for-profit and local government services.

80% of children are enrolled in long day care services



Contribution to outcomes

Links to Early Learning's approach to connecting families to ECEC services appears to be highly effective, and builds the confidence and capability of families to navigate a highly complex early childhood education system.

Qualitative findings appear to indicate improvements in family wellbeing, although we have no quantitative data to confirm this.

The program's approach to building the capacity of services appears to be less sustained and less effective.



Findings

A key consideration for Links to Early Learning is increasing its focus and intentionality around capacity building in local services. A smaller catchment area would mean a smaller pool of ECEC services – increasing the opportunity and capacity to work with them more intensively.

Working towards local systemic changes – like improved service capacity and quality – will help address the gap between the number of families Links to Early Learning has the capacity to support and the level of need in the community.

Progress towards outcomes in the Links to Early Learning's theory of change



Achieving

Increase families' knowledge and confidence in ECEC and understanding of its role supporting children's development



Substantial progress

Increase family wellbeing and reduce underlying barriers to ECEC participation



Some progress

Increase the proportion of ECEC services that are welcoming and effective at working with families experiencing vulnerability

Sustain

Retaining families in the program

TARGET

INDIVIDUALISE

CONNECT

SUSTAIN

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

OUTPUTS

OUTCOMES

A strength of the Links to Early Learning model is that ongoing and intensive support is built into the model, giving Linkers the structure and support to provide active follow up.

Ongoing support is built into the model and caseloads

The Practice Manual highlights the importance of staying in contact with families for active and ongoing engagement. Caseloads appear to be designed to enable this, with each Linker working intensively with a few families but having time and space for ongoing engagement.

The Practice Manual includes an intensity matrix, with criteria for the support needs and intensity of engagement. Each family is given a rating at the start of their engagement, which is used to guide the Linker's approach but also their caseload. This means intensive and ongoing support is built into the structure of the model.

Active follow up is effective at keeping families engaged

Linkers reported active and ongoing follow up of families, with regular check-in points all the way to school entry. Once children are enrolled in an ECEC service, it appears that the majority stay enrolled. Of the 142 enrolled in ECEC:

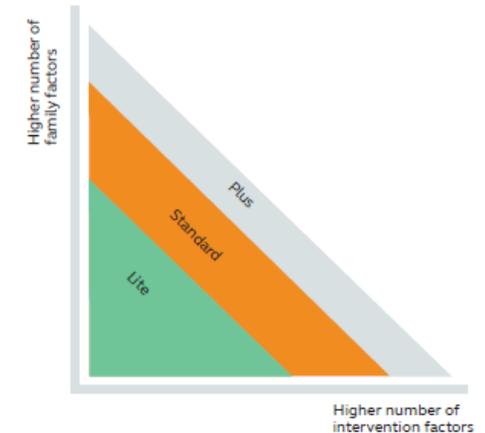
- Around 82% are still attending ECEC or have exited to school.
- Around 6% relocate and move out of area.
- The remaining 9% are a mix of families who withdraw or disengage for unknown reasons or who withdraw because their children are happily enrolled and they have no further need for Links to Early Learning.

There is limited data on the reasons why families disengage or withdraw. However, there was consistent feedback from ECEC services that the Linkers were always available to help if families stopped attending, and were usually effective at helping them re-engage.

Even services that were skilled and experienced in working with families with complex needs were clear that the extra support provided by the Links to Early Learning team was hugely beneficial and provided resources they would not have access to otherwise.

"The families that come in by themselves are much harder to keep. If their first entry point isn't a positive one, then it makes it much harder to keep them ... Linkers also know what to share and can translate between the centre and the family.

Many case workers believe they don't need to explain what has happened to the family. Having an agency that can help you meaningfully and actually understand the children's background, so you can support them, is so nice" - ECEC service coordinator



Case study

We started working with a little boy, but he just wasn't setting in childcare. He was one of four children to a single mum. He has language delay, and his two siblings have disabilities.

On the day I called to check in, mum was about to pull him out of childcare. But we came up with a plan, where I would go to childcare with him every day for a month. He needed someone there to help him settle in when he was upset. And mum needed a strategy to deal with it.

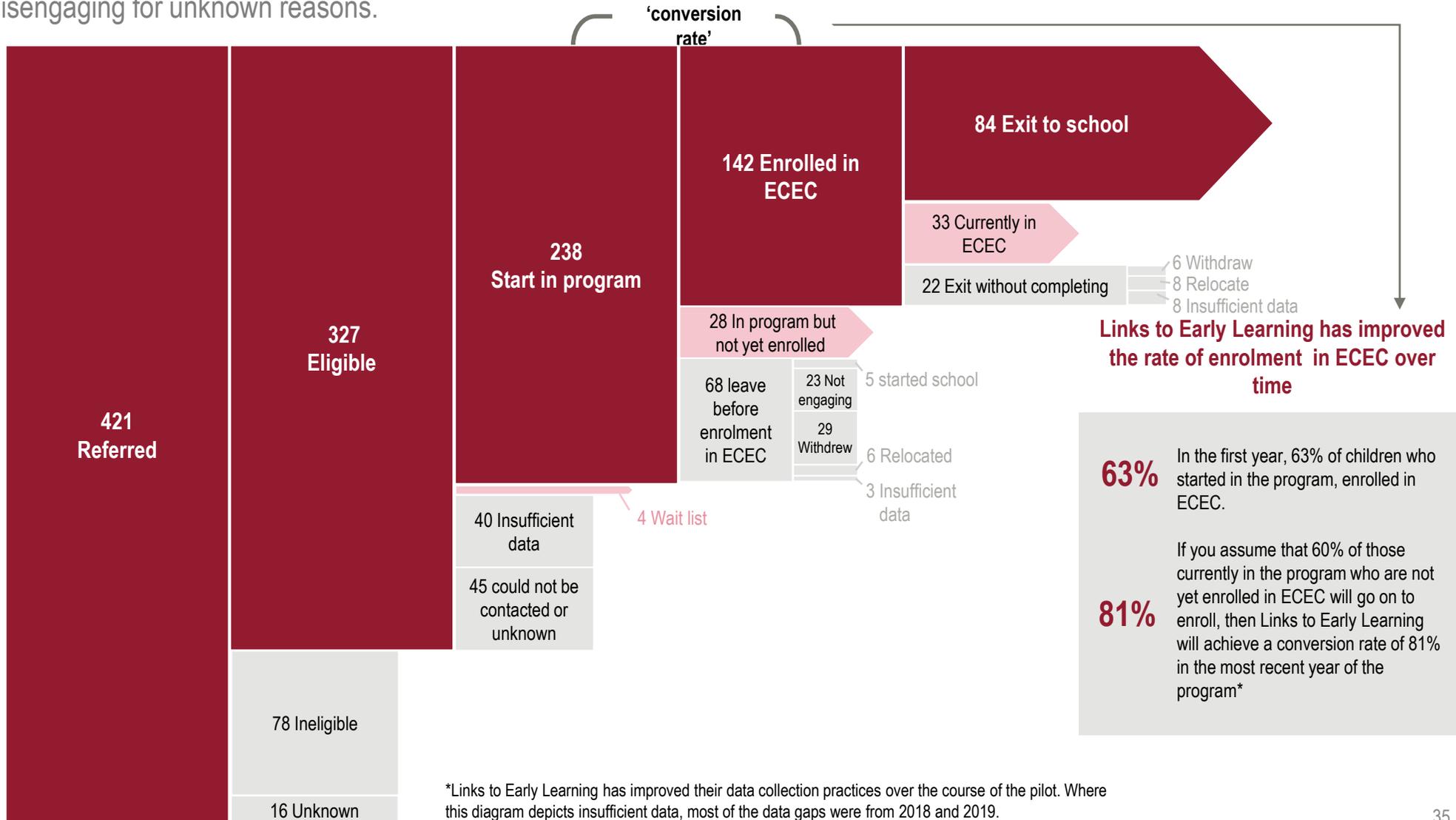
The centre staff can do some of this, but they're busy. I could send mum photos of how he was going, I was honest with her, kept her updated on his progress. I took her out for coffee, and it was important to have that relationship with her.

After a month, he was much more settled. Mum is thinking about going back to study now, which is a great win for her.

She would have pulled him out if I didn't call that day. - Linker

Family engagement in Links to Early Learning

Over the last three years, 238 families have engaged with Links to Early Learning. 142 of these families were successfully enrolled in ECEC. Families exit the program due to relocation, withdrawing – often because they no longer need support - or disengaging for unknown reasons.



Note, diagram to scale.

Effectiveness of sustaining children’s enrolment

Links to Early Learning appears to be effective at keeping most children enrolled in an ECEC service, but more granular data about the families who do disengage is needed. Systematically collecting and reflecting on this data would better equip Linkers to continue to build and refine their practice and the model.

Contributing to outcomes for children

Ongoing engagement with Links to Early Learning families appears to support ongoing enrolment and engagement. There is limited data on actual hours and days of attendance, as this would be challenging for Linkers to collect, but it was the perception of Linkers and ECEC services that most children stayed in ECEC until school entry.

“Usually the children attend two days a week, every week they go until they start kindergarten. I have seen a lot of change in the children. You can see how they change, even in their English.

From the [ECEC] centre, the kids now learn English and they will teach their parents as well. The children are laughing at the child is bossing the mum around about (in) English [laughs]. It’s the first time they have the opportunity to learn English.” - Referrer

“They are normal children now, they can have their rights. Before, because they don’t have a health care card, they don’t have any Centrelink subsidies, and couldn’t go to early learning. This helps them to be a part of the community.- Referrer



Findings

Maintaining ongoing contact and engagement with families appears to be an important part of the model and should be retained.

While most families stay engaged in ECEC, building a more comprehensive understanding of the families who do disengage is critical. Linkers noted that many families withdraw because support is no longer needed, but this is not systematically collected or reflected in the Client Register.

Progress towards outcomes in the Links to Early Learning’s theory of change



Achieving

Increase the number of children attending quality early learning



Substantial progress

Increase children’s readiness for school

Influence outcomes

Influence outcomes

Links to Early Learning is contributing to systemic change – in its local community and statewide. Given the Links to Early Learning team alone cannot meet the level of unmet need in the community, these signs of change in the service system are highly promising and extend the scope and scale of their impact.

We identified a number of instances of Links to Early Learning influencing the local service system and beginning to influence larger systemic barriers.



Addressing cost barriers

Links to Early Learning was a key part of an initiative to secure free places in preschool for refugee and asylum seeker children – who currently have no access to Child Care Subsidy or other funding for ECEC.

Links to Early Learning worked with Canterbury Bankstown council to secure multiple free places across their preschools for refugee and asylum seeker children.

The unique role that Links to Early Learning play in selecting and supporting the placement of the children is one of the key reasons the initiative went ahead. The Council held concerns about how to select the children, and about imposing an additional burden on their centre directors. The council trusted Uniting and the partnership with Links to Early Learning addressed these concerns.

Links to Early Learning was then able to build on this commitment and other local ECEC services also committed to free places. This included privately run long day care services, and a large not-for-profit provider.

At least 14 refugee and asylum seeker children have received free places as a result of this initiative.



Supporting others to adopt the model

Links to Early Learning has provided support to other early learning services interested in better supporting families experiencing disadvantage to access early childhood education.

They have shared information and support with two other providers who have indicated that they are likely to develop an in-house model of support that draws on the Links to Early Learning approach.



Signs of scale and systemic influence

The NSW Government recently released a tender for a pilot of an early childhood linker model that appears to have been influenced by the Links to Early Learning model.

It includes many of the same components and is being trialled in four areas – with indications that government may be considering wider scale up.

Appendix A: Previous evaluation

Summary of Previous Links to Early Learning evaluation

With the support of Western Sydney University, the Uniting Research and Social Policy team evaluated the first two years of the Links to Early Learning Program. The evaluation found positive outcomes for children, families and early learning services.

The evaluation sought to:

- Identify the barriers and facilitators to early childhood education – particularly non-financial barriers
- Assess the impact of Links to Early Learning on children and families
- Identify opportunities for program and operational improvements
- Identify the best ways to engage with children facing barriers to early learning

Key findings

Impacts for children

- 302 children were referred to the program and 119 were enrolled.
- Children were attending for an average of 19.23 hours per week, and 58% were expected to meet the threshold for attending 600 hours of preschool in the year before school.
- Cost, access/travel, disability status and the configuration of the ECEC system were identified as the main barriers to access
- Parents and teachers and educators agreed that children were more school-ready as a result of the program

Impacts for families

- Parents reported having time to make positive changes in their lives, including training courses, applying for jobs, and socialising with family. This improved their wellbeing and self-esteem.
- Parents reported greater understanding of how the childcare system works.

Impacts for early learning centres

- The majority of ECEC staff reported that Links to Early Learning built their capacity to work with families from disadvantaged backgrounds, and spoke strongly about the role the team played assisting centres with enrolment and transition

Recommendations

- Additional resourcing to cope with the increasing number of referrals
- Improve the quality of administrative data

Previous evaluation – outcomes for children and families

Uniting's Research and Social Policy team conducted 42 interviews with families, including newly referred and those who had been in the program a long time. They highlighted a range of benefits for their wellbeing and their children's development.

Impacts for children

Impacts for children included:

- Improved school readiness
- Progress in communication and social skills
- Greater independence
- Overcoming separation anxiety

"She's become more independent and her words are so much better. Her sentences are a lot better. Her playing, even when sharing toys and stuff. All her social skills have improved and she blows me away still and she's mine"

"She's started off very shy and wouldn't say a thing and was very alert. She was absolutely selectively mute. I went up there and she would not open her mouth. Up till about four weeks ago. And she's now, she's made lots of little friends and she's talking to her friends, she's talking to me, she's talking to everyone else. She's very social"

"The program helped him so much ... for example, when he first started school his teacher was very surprised he can write his name"

"He's a lot more confident. He's saying his alphabet a lot clearer. He's got more interest in just learning things. Overall, he's just grown"

"I always used to feed him in my hands, so he wasn't able to eat by himself. He wasn't able to go to toilet by himself. So, he learnt all that in childcare"

Impacts for families

Impacts for families included:

- Improved confidence in parenting
- Alleviated stress and improved wellbeing
- Reduced financial pressure
- Creating space and time for study or work

"I was staying at home for a long time and just staying with the baby because she was little. And that was making me crazy. Yeah, so that helped me ... (become) more social. She's more social, interacting with people. She's calmed down, I'm calmed down"

"So while she was in daycare, I was doing my volunteering, and I started my certificate in accounts administration, and that was really helpful. I'm still going outside and looking for jobs. So that's given me at least hope that I will get it."

"Mainly for me only because I don't get a break from my kids at all. So, her going to preschool every day gives me a couple of hours to myself that I wouldn't normally get ... obviously makes me not as stressed, which impacts the whole family. So, her going to preschool is like a godsend to us at the moment"

"Knowing he's enjoying it and making friends, I feel more comfortable. Like I'm not failing. I feel like I'm being a good parent because he gets to learn those things"

"Now that she's going, I can have a bit of time (to) myself. That was one of the big things, it's helped my wellbeing. It was me getting time."

Appendix B: Evaluation framework

Key evaluation questions

To understand the effectiveness and impact of L2EL's approach, the evaluation will seek to answer key questions about the design, implementation, outputs and outcomes of the program.

DESIGN

Was the program designed appropriately for the problem being addressed?

IMPLEMENTATION

Was the program implemented as intended?

OUTPUTS

What outputs have been produced and used

OUTCOMES

What are the effects of the program on its users

TARGET

Did the program target and reach the right cohort/s of children and families?

- Was selection of the target cohort based on evidence / does it reflect L2EL's problem definition/theory of change?
- Was the plan for reaching the cohort sound and evidence-based?

- What strategies did L2EL use to target and reach the intended cohort, were they the strategies outlined in the program design, and how effective were they?

- How many families did L2EL engage and were they from the target cohorts?

- Are families more confident about the benefits and practicalities of attending ECEC?

INDIVIDUALISE

How effective was the program at resolving barriers to access to ECEC for families?

- Did the program design reflect evidence and experience about what it takes to identify and resolve the barriers experienced by the target cohorts?

- How successfully did L2EL identify barriers to accessing ECEC?
- How well were those barriers addressed?

- What barriers were identified?
- What support was offered?
- What services were used by families?

- Do families have improved wellbeing?
- Are ECEC services more effective at supporting families experiencing disadvantage?

CONNECT

Were families effectively connected to ECEC services and the broader support that enabled participation in early learning?

- Did the program design reflect evidence about what it takes to support families to connect with ECEC and other services?

- How did L2EL connect families to ECEC services, was it effective?
- How did L2EL ensure ECEC services were equipped to engage with L2EL families, was it effective?
- Did L2EL connect families to broader support, was it effective?

- How many families connected with an ECEC services?
- How many ECEC services received support from L2EL?
- How many broader services were families referred to?

- Did more children attend quality early learning for at least 600 hours in the year before school?

SUSTAIN

Do families in the program stay in ECEC until school entry?

- Was the program designed to sustain participation in ECEC and address barriers to low attendance?

- What did L2EL do in order to sustain participation in ECEC, and was the approach effective?

- How many families stay in the program until school entry?
- How many families disengage from L2EL and why?

- Did children have improved readiness for school?