



**The Fritz Family Foundation supports initiatives and projects that provide benevolent relief to disadvantaged families to help more vulnerable children engage in early learning programs.**

**We partner with visionary people and organisations who share our passion for high-quality early childhood education for all young Australians.**

# The Value of a Good Start in Life

A good start helps children succeed in school and work in later life. Numerous studies, including 'Changing the Life Trajectories of Australia's Most Vulnerable Children' by Kids First Australia, find that early childhood education (ECE) is a powerful tool to overcome social disadvantage and improve the lives of children and their families. The NSW Government's report *Forecasting future outcomes*, released in 2019, outlines the massive costs of poorly handled ECE to society and the economy.

Yet, despite significant investment of private and public funds, the gap between children in the most disadvantaged and least disadvantaged areas continues to widen. One in five children in Australia starts school with developmental disadvantages; for Indigenous kids, this figure rises to two in five. The negative outcomes for this largely neglected cohort tend to persist over their school life and into adulthood, affecting both social integration and employment. That is **20%** of all Australian children, or **60,000** children every single year.

School readiness does not reside solely in the child but reflects the environments in which children find themselves – their families, early childhood settings, schools, neighbourhoods, and communities. Children's outcomes are also directly related to the educational levels of their parents, especially mothers.

The barriers preventing children receiving ECE tend to be cultural and social rather than financial. These problems are widely known, but not enough is done to change the status quo and implement proven solution. Engaging with local communities to encourage the use of integrated services produces the best results for children and their families and generates social and economic benefits to the whole community.

## Our Solution

Our research suggests that the provision of early childhood education for children in disadvantaged families requires a new approach to be effective. These children are not held back by a lack of funding or facilities but the complex factors underlying these families' lack of participation. We need to address the root causes of the huge disconnect between good intentions, Australia's significant investments in early childhood education, and a lack of outcomes on the ground. More should be done to understand the need of people and communities who remain estranged from the system to tailor provision to their needs. Top down methods tend to fail, but **grassroots community support** can achieve startling results, as shown by the success of programmes such as *Our Place* in Victoria and schemes to include children with learning problems in mainstream schools.

*Our Place* offers a best-practice model of how integrating health, welfare, school and early learning on the same site encourages engagement by families. It started in a socially disadvantaged area of Doveton by converting a rundown public school building into a highly functioning learning centre with ECE facilities, primary and junior secondary school, and family and community services.

The Fritz Family Foundation invests in new joint ECE initiatives that promote family engagement through **integrated service delivery models** such as *Our Place*. The Foundation runs its activities in partnership with other organisations and brings to the table financial support, fundraising experience and access to a broad network of experts and decision makers in government and business to help get new projects off the ground.

## Our Partners

The benevolent activities of the Fritz Family Foundation are informed by the expertise of many organisations and individuals working in ECE which form a network of personal contacts developed over the last decade by the Foundation's Board members. These organisations include federal and state government agencies on Family and Community Services, Health, Education and Justice, The Smith Family, Kids First Australia, *Our Place*, Logan Together, Stand Up, Dusseldorp Forum, Goodstart, *Early Start* at the University of Wollongong, and other organisations working with disadvantaged communities. The Foundation also coordinates a significant group of volunteers to assist with the delivery of projects and activities on the ground.

## Our Activities

To identify the cohort of children in need of support, we use the definition of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) that provides assessment of young children's development based on a teacher-completed instrument across five developmental domains. The AEDC measures five areas, or domains, of early childhood development that form the foundations for later good health, education and social outcomes. These domains are physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), and communication skills and general knowledge. An AEDC score is calculated for each child for each domain that has 75% or more questions completed. Our focus is the children who are classified as 'developmentally vulnerable' or 'developmentally at risk' on one, two or more AEDC domains.

Research shows that developmental vulnerability is clustered by location and correlates with socio-economic disadvantage. The proportion of children deemed vulnerable on two or more AEDC domains is significantly higher in regional and remote areas and certain outer metropolitan suburbs. Furthermore, most inmates in Australia's jails come from a relative handful of postcodes, and improving ECE in these areas through greater engagement – rather than more funding – would help save future generations from a similar fate.

The Fritz Family Foundation supports programmes and activities which directly engage with disadvantaged communities in remote and rural Australia and foster grassroots action, including:

- **The development of new facilities, community support centres and programs for parents**
- **Family-focused initiatives to stimulate a rich home learning environment**

Priority is given to initiatives which promote best practice underpinned by evidence. Decades of research consistently shows that children thrive when they have regular access to high-quality ECE. Disadvantaged families need strong community engagement to participate, and public policy has failed to consistently encourage this effort. Addressing this issue will significantly improve child welfare, education outcomes and national productivity, and benefit society by reducing welfare dependency and juvenile crime.