

A young girl with curly brown hair, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, is smiling and holding a green block. In the background, another child in a yellow and blue plaid shirt is looking down. The scene is set in a brightly lit room, likely a kindergarten or play area.

How Early Start Kindergarten grants work in long day care

Information pack for Victorian long day care services



Community Child Care Association (CCC) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the strength of family connection and kinship within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their ongoing dedication to educating and caring for children. Sovereignty of these lands was never ceded.

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What is Early Start Kindergarten?

Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) provides eligible children with 15 hours per week of free or low-cost kindergarten, for two years before they start school.

To be eligible for ESK, children must be three years old by April 30 in the year they start kindergarten.

If a child's birthday falls between January 1 and April 30, you will need to work with the child's family to determine when they will start two years of kindergarten. Consider when the child is likely to start school and work backwards.

To be eligible for ESK, children must also be:

- From a refugee or asylum seeker background, or
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or
- Known to child protection.

Evidence shows that two years are better than one when it comes to early learning. So, taking part in a quality kindergarten program at an earlier age leads to positive outcomes for children, which all children are entitled to.

Early Start Kindergarten supports children to access high-quality, play-based learning which is a powerful way to support their development, especially for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

Who provides the Early Start Kindergarten grants?

ESK grants are available from the Victorian Government. You can complete an ESK funding request in the Department of Education and Training Victoria Kindergarten Information Management (KIM) System.

A kindergarten program delivered for 15 hours per week is best to maximise learning and development opportunities for the eligible child. Where this is not possible, pro-rata payments are available for the hours that eligible children are enrolled.



ESK grants are available as one-off annual payments, made directly to your service for each eligible child.

Which long day care services are eligible?

Any long day care service offering an approved kindergarten program is eligible to access ESK grants. For the purposes of ESK funding, a kindergarten program is an early learning program that:

- Is delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher who is registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching, and
- Aligns with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

Your service does not need to be receiving kindergarten per capita grants to be eligible for ESK.

The eligibility criteria are outlined in detail in the [Kindergarten Funding Guide](#). Amongst other things, your service must:

- Provide a kindergarten program, and
- Offer at least 15 hours per week for 40 weeks of the year, or 600 hours per year (e.g., 12.5 hours for 48 weeks), and
- Operate in accordance with Child Safe Standards.

How do I apply?

To receive ESK funding, your service must already have or must enter into a service agreement with the Victorian Government. This is known as a Service Agreement Management System (SAMS) agreement. Please contact your Department of Education and Training regional office to set up a SAMS agreement. If you are unsure of your regional office number, call **1800 809 834**.

If your service already delivers a state-funded kindergarten program, you can apply for ESK via KIM by selecting the Early Start Kindergarten tab.

If your funding request requires review by the department, it will move to pending approval status. If your funding request meets auto-approval criteria, it will move to an approved status.





Frequently asked questions

How do ESK grants work in relation to the Three-Year-Old Kindergarten rollout?

Three-Year-Old Kindergarten will not impact ESK. ESK will continue to provide 15 hours of funded kindergarten per week for all eligible children.

It's important to continue to enrol eligible children in ESK, even if funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten is available at your service. This guarantees eligible children continue to access the full 15 hours of ESK in all service settings, regardless of the number of hours of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten offered.

It also ensures that service providers can continue to receive all their funding entitlements. For example, ESK enrolments contribute to School Readiness Funding calculations.

Can ESK grants be used for three-year-old early learning programs that are delivered as part of an integrated long day care program?

Yes. The funding is to support the participation of eligible children in a three-year-old program for up to 15 hours per week (600 hours per year). This can be accessed as part of the child's regular long day care booking.

Children's arrival and departure times can vary to suit the needs of their families. In long day care settings, it's common for children to access ESK by attending two or three days per week.

Can ESK grants be used for three-year-old early learning programs delivered in mixed-age groups?

Yes. If the program meets kindergarten program and ratio requirements under the National Regulations, it does not matter how the age groups are arranged.

For example, ESK could be used in a room for children aged 3–5 years, or 0–5 years, as long as a Bachelor-trained teacher is leading the program.





We only have a qualified early childhood teacher in our four-year-old room. Can eligible three-year-old children be included in this program?

Yes. Higher educator qualifications are associated with better child outcomes and there are increased benefits for play and learning for children when they are in multi-age group rooms.

The early childhood teacher should ensure the environment is supportive, the child’s needs and interests are integrated into the program and that there are opportunities for the child to strengthen relationships with their older peers. Parents should be reassured that this approach is beneficial for their child.

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What about four-year-old children?

ESK extension grants are available for eligible children who turn four years old or older by April 30 in the year they are attending a funded kindergarten program, who are ineligible for Kindergarten Fee Subsidy, and who:

- Are from a refugee or asylum seeker background, or
- Identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or
- Have had contact with child protection, or
- Have participated in a state-funded Access to Early Learning program.

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Why is the ESK rate for three-year-old children higher than for four-year-olds?

Services delivering a funded kindergarten program for four-year-old children in the year before they start school already receive kindergarten per capita grants for each eligible four-year-old. Families pay any gap fees to access kindergarten for their children.

ESK extension grants are paid in addition to per capita funding to enable free or low-cost kindergarten for eligible four-year-old children, and to cover or reduce any gap fees for the family.

Similarly, the ESK rate is higher for three-year-old children so that it covers most of, or the full cost of, the eligible three-year-old children to attend kindergarten for 15 hours per week.

How do I know if an individual child is eligible?

Advice of eligibility may be verbal from a parent, guardian or carer, or can be written or verbal advice from any professional, such as a caseworker or Koorie Engagement Support Officer.

No other action or information is required to determine eligibility for children known to Child Protection, or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children.

A confidential record of the child's eligibility should be documented and maintained in the child's enrolment records, e.g., 'Advised by parent on 24 January 2021 that child is eligible for ESK grant because...'

The Department does not require proof of eligibility for ESK for children from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. Early childhood services may ask for proof of eligibility for their own records but should work with families and supporting professionals to ensure that proof of eligibility is not a barrier to access kindergarten.

Children are eligible for ESK if they hold, or have a parent, carer or guardian who holds one of the following:

- A humanitarian or refugee visa (or is applying for a humanitarian or refugee visa)
- A current or expired ImmiCard
- An approved exemption from the Department of Education and Training.



If there is any uncertainty around eligible visas or if an exemption is required, please contact your local Department office. Exemptions will be considered by the Department where a child, their parent or guardian has been impacted by a refugee or asylum seeker experience.



Can ESK and ESK extension grants be used when families are eligible for Australian Government assistance such as Child Care Subsidy or Additional Child Care Subsidy?

Yes. ESK and the ESK extension grants can be used in combination with the Australian Government's Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS). In all instances where a child is eligible, your service should apply for ESK.

Will receiving ESK or ESK extension grants impact CCS or ACCS payments?

No. ESK grants are annual payments to the service to help them provide 15 hours of no-cost or low-cost kindergarten delivered by a qualified teacher to eligible children.

ESK grants are administered by services separately from CCS and ACCS. ESK grants are one-off annual payments to services that are not linked directly to families' accounts.

The Australian Government provides a range of fee assistance schemes to families to support the participation of children in approved education and care, such as long day care services. This includes CCS and other additional subsidies within the Child Care Safety Net. Eligibility for these forms of assistance will depend on the parent, guardian or carer's particular circumstances. The Australian Child Care Subsidies include:

- Child wellbeing
- Grandparents
- Temporary financial hardship
- Transition to work.

ESK grants can still be accessed by families that are eligible for any of the above types of fee assistance.





What can Early Start Kindergarten grants be spent on?

Your long day care service must use ESK or ESK extension grants in the first instance to allow eligible children to attend your kindergarten program for 15 hours per week for 40 weeks, at no cost to the family.

If any funding remains, this can be put towards:

- Gap fees not covered by CCS or ACCS
- Professional development specifically tailored to trauma and culturally safe practices
- Resources to support creating a culturally safe environment
- Covering additional out-of-pocket costs for families such as excursions/incursions
- Supporting the inclusion of a Three-Year-Old Kinder program
- Assisting with financial expenses whilst accessing ACCS
- Purchasing resources to support inclusion.

If the annual grant has been paid but a child has left the service before completing a full year, the service should use those funds to engage or support other eligible children.

In the instance where a child moves to another service with the same Approved Provider, the service can redirect funding to the service the child has moved to. Please contact your DET regional office if you require advice on redirecting funding for an enrolment transfer.



Services should set up internal processes for tracking income and expenditure regarding ESK funding. Please see an example of this on page 8 (next page).



Case study: Early Start Kindergarten grant

Three-year-old Leon* is enrolled in a free 15 hour per week kindergarten program through Early Start Kindergarten. Leon is eligible for Early Start Kindergarten as he is in out-of-home care and therefore known to child protection. His kindergarten was notified of his eligibility for Early Start Kindergarten by the child protection practitioner supporting Leon's family. Unfortunately, Leon's attendance at his education and care service has been low, and COVID-19 lockdowns presented a further challenge. Leon's older siblings also have low school attendance, and there have been continued efforts to maintain engagement with their family by the education and care service, the school, and the local Maternal and Child Health Service.

Continued check-ins, regular phone calls, additional support offered and assistance with allied health referrals have helped Leon's educators build a relationship with him and his family. They have been able to share information with the school that his siblings attend (with parental consent). Information has also been able to be shared with

*Child's name has been changed to protect their identity.

the onsite Maternal Health Nurse so that the group of professionals can work together to best support Leon and his family.

The educators have used the [All About Me](#) resources to help them get to know Leon, and have been building attachments using the [Circle of Security](#) training resources. Educators have also been empathetic and understanding in their approach to working with Leon and his family.

Child protection continues to support the education and care service while experiencing challenges engaging with Leon's family.

The educators at Leon's service know that building meaningful and trusting relationships with children and families is key to their engagement in the program. This is also an important step in establishing a connection for Leon in preparation for Four-Year-Old Kindergarten. The educational leader and the educator team work hard to ensure support is available for each child in the program and to create an individualised list of goals for the children, so every educator or teacher who works with the child is familiar with them.



While there are sometimes barriers and challenges to continued engagement with children enrolled in Early Start Kindergarten and their families, the benefits are multi-fold. The positive impacts on children's cognitive, emotional and social skills are always worth the effort.



Further resources

For services:

Access the How-to Guide for KIM

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/kinderim.aspx#link60

Child Care Provider Handbook

www.dese.gov.au/early-childhood/resources/child-care-provider-handbook

Department of Education and Training Victoria

www.education.vic.gov.au

Early Start Kindergarten

www.vic.gov.au/early-start-kindergarten

Kindergarten Funding Rates

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/kinderfundrates.aspx

Kindergarten Information Management System

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/kinderim.aspx

Supporting Children in Out-of-Home Care: Information for Early Childhood Professionals

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/health/outofhomecare/Pages/supportingchildren.aspx

The Kindergarten Funding Guide

www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/kinderfundingcriteria.aspx

Three-Year-Old Kindergarten for Victoria

www.vic.gov.au/three-year-old-kindergarten-victorians

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For families and carers:

Early Start Kindergarten

www.vic.gov.au/early-start-kindergarten

Koorie Kids Shine

www.vic.gov.au/koorie-kids-shine





For more information about Early Start Kindergarten, call an Early Childhood Performance and Planning Advisor located in each Department of Education and Training regional office.

**Department of Education and Training
Victoria Regional Offices**

[www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/
Pages/regions.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/contact/Pages/regions.aspx)

Phone **1800 338 663** if you are unsure of the regional office number, or **(03) 9637 2000** with general enquiries.

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For free advice for long day care directors, coordinators, leaders, teachers and educators, call Community Child Care Association (max. five minutes for non-members) on **(03) 9486 3455**.