



Program overview

What is Best Start?

Best Start is a Victorian government early years initiative auspiced by the departments of Human Services and Education. It supports families, caregivers and communities to provide the best possible environment, experiences and care for young children in the important years from pregnancy to school. Best Start aims to improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of all Victorian children supporting communities, parents and service providers to improve universal early years services so they are responsive to local needs. It has a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

These improvements in services are expected to result in:

- better access to child and family support, health services and early education
- improvements in parents' capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life
- communities that are more child and family friendly.

The evidence

The early childhood literature provides substantial evidence that:

- the early years are crucial in setting the stage for later life
- young children develop through their relationships with others
- children's development is shaped by the balance between risk and protective factors
- supporting families effectively requires a comprehensive, coordinated family-centred service system.

Setting the stage for later life

Brain research shows that the early years of development from conception to age six, particularly the first three years, provide the basis for the development of competence, coping and emotional skills that affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life. There is growing evidence that good nutrition,

nurturing and responsive care-giving in these early years, combined with high-quality early childhood development programs, can improve the long-term outcomes for all children's health, development, learning and wellbeing.

Developing through relationships with others

All young children's learning and development occurs in the context of their relationships with their caregivers. These early experiences form characteristic ways of relating to other people and of coping with the ebb and flow of emotions. These patterns of behaviour are not just psychological tendencies, but are actually built into the architecture and physiology of children's brains.

The balance between risk and protective factors

The balance between factors known to place development at risk and those known to have protective properties shapes children's development. Children exposed to multiple risk factors become vulnerable to developmental problems of health, learning and wellbeing, whereas those exposed to protective factors are more likely to be resilient in the face of environmental adversities. These determinants of child development have an impact at all levels: family, neighbourhood, community and economy. To ensure more children develop well, we need to reduce the factors that place them at risk and promote those that are protective. Among other things, this means building more child and family-friendly communities.¹

Providing a comprehensive, coordinated family-centred service system

To achieve better outcomes for children and families, we need an integrated system of services that can respond to the emerging needs of children and families in local community settings. To become more effective, service systems need to adopt a family-centred approach to working with families, a partnership approach to working with communities, and a strength-based approach to policy and service development. Better outcomes are also achieved when services are comprehensive and inclusive.

1. A diagram of risk and protective factors with associated/protection of adverse outcomes can be found at www.dhs.vic.gov.au and the Centre for Community Child Health's publication, *A review of the early childhood literature* (Feb, 2000) at: www.rch.org.au/ccch

The challenge is to adopt an ecological perspective, collectively addressing all the factors that impact on child and family functioning, rather than continuing to provide separate services that each focus on a single factor or problem. To achieve a holistic, integrated system, we need to adopt an approach that is cross-sectoral, multilevel, and has strong local leadership.

This evidence can inform the development of early years services through planning, in partnership with the community and government, for early years services and activities that are:

- sufficient in number to meet the need
- high quality and developmentally appropriate
- across the range of education, care and health
- targeted at children at risk of long-term damage or disadvantage
- culturally appropriate
- aimed at minimising risk and strengthening protective factors
- comprehensive in nature
- strongly linked and coordinated across the universal, secondary and tertiary sectors
- able to foster participation
- family friendly and adopt a family-centred approach to practice.

Background

Phase 1 of Best Start (2001-02) focused on project design and development and engendered interest and engagement of key government departments that impact on the lives of young children and their families.

Project outputs during this phase included:

- a report on the evidence base underpinning the rationale for investment in early childhood, *Best Start evidence base: Best Start for children, the evidence base underlying investment in the early years (children 0-8)* (Department of Human Services, 2001) (www.beststart.vic.gov.au)
- the development of a range of Best Start indicators to measure progress based on the evidence *Best Start indicators project* (Department of Human Services, 2001) (www.beststart.vic.gov.au)
- a report on program types and interventions for which there is evidence regarding their effectiveness in improving outcomes for children and families, *Best Start: effective intervention programs: examples of effective interventions, programs and service models* (Department of Human Services, 2001) (www.beststart.vic.gov.au)

Phase 2 (2002-06) saw the implementation of 11 Best Start demonstration projects and two Aboriginal Best Start demonstration projects. These projects originally due to be completed during 2006, now have ongoing funding to continue their partnerships.

Prior to establishing the Aboriginal Best Start projects, the *Aboriginal Best Start status report* was published (www.beststart.vic.gov.au).

Also during this phase, the Breaking Cycles Building Futures research project, funded by the Premiers' Drug Prevention Council, was undertaken to identify barriers to service inclusion for vulnerable families and children. The final report identifies a model for improving access to services and strategies to promote more inclusive antenatal and universal early years services that better engage and assist vulnerable families (www.beststart.vic.gov.au).

The Best Start evaluation commenced during this phase providing support and important information to Best Start partnerships and government about 'what is being tried, what is working and for whom'.

Phase 3 (2005-11) is an opportunity for Best Start to translate and apply the learnings gained from the demonstration sites to the new sites. Changes made as a result of the learnings from the demonstration sites include:

- further refinement of the statewide indicators
- improving the analysis of outcome data to inform planning and evaluation
- more targeted action plans incorporating interventions that are evidence-based
- strengthening partnership development.

This phase includes:

- development of 13 new mainstream Best Start projects and four new Aboriginal Best Start projects
- extension of the existing mainstream and Aboriginal Best Start projects.

The Best Start approach

The Best Start approach is to strengthen the local capacity of parents, families and communities and early years services to better provide for the needs of all young children and their families. This is achieved by:

- listening to parent and family knowledge and expectations
- the inclusion of vulnerable children and families in early years services
- the inclusion of Aboriginal children and their families

- ensuring services are inclusive of culturally diverse children and families
- mobilising community interest, resources and infrastructure to create child-friendly communities
- translating early childhood evidence into practice
- coordinating and integrating existing services
- introducing innovative changes to services, based on evidence
- developing strong cross-sectoral local partnerships.



Best Start partnerships

International experience shows, and the Best Start evaluation confirms, that a strong and effective partnership platform is essential for effective planning and is an indicator of success.

Local partnerships are the cornerstone of the Best Start approach. Many benefits are derived from forming broad partnerships that bring together expertise and experience in child rearing, early years service delivery, local planning and good practice. This expertise and experience that can be used to develop innovative and collaborative responses to improve outcomes for children and their families.

The Best Start partnership, and its individual members, is expected to lead the way in cultural change, service coordination and integration. Early indications from the evaluation of Best Start are that service cooperation and collaboration has been effective in the Best Start partnerships.

The partnerships include representatives of local parents, providers of services for young children and their families, the tiers of government, and other key groups who are involved in, and can impact upon, the day-to-day lives of young children and their families within a community.

Best Start partnerships build on existing early years partnerships, such as those developed through Municipal Early Years Plans. They are embedded within other local planning structures and processes to ensure better integration and sustainability of change beyond the life of the project.

Measures of improvement

Best Start is focused on achieving significant improvements in outcomes for all children. Positive impacts will be felt throughout a child's life into adulthood and across generations as today's children become parents in the future.

The indicators used to monitor and assess outcomes have been chosen as the Best Start measures because they:

- are known to have a strong evidence base linking them to improved health, development, learning and wellbeing outcomes for children
- are collected regularly through existing data processes
- are susceptible to change within the short to medium term
- provide consistent measurement across diverse project sites.

The Best Start Indicators, listed below, are grouped under the domains of health and wellbeing, learning and development, and safety.

Health and wellbeing

- Increased rate of breastfeeding
- Decreased rate of women smoking during pregnancy
- Decreased rate of children exposed to tobacco smoke in the home
- Increased rates of immunisation
- Increased attendance at maternal and child health
- Increased rate of children who are protected from summer sun
- Increased rate of children who participate in physical activity
- Proportion of children who clean their teeth at least twice a day

Learning and development

- Increased rate of parents reading to their children
- Increased participation in kindergarten
- Reduced absences from primary school
- Improved reading, writing and numeracy

Safety

- Decreased rate of re-notifications to child protection
- Decreased rate of unintentional injury
- Proportion of children whose parents report high levels of social support



Best Start sites

For more information, contact your local Best Start site or visit the Best Start website: www.beststart.vic.gov.au

Name	Address	Telephone
Ballarat	Family and Children's Services City of Ballarat Phoenix Building, 25 Armstrong Street Ballarat 3350	(03) 5320 5773
Brimbank	Youth and Family Services Brimbank City Council Alexander Avenue Sunshine 3020	(03) 9249 4891
Cardinia	Community Services Cardinia Shire Council Henty Way Pakenham 3810	(03) 5945 4282 1300 787 624
Casey	Family and Children's Services City of Casey Magid Drive Narre Warren 3805	(03) 9705 5200
Central Goldfields	Community Services Maryborough District Health Service Clarendon Street Maryborough 3465	(03) 5461 0400
Darebin	Community Services Darebin City Council 274 Gower Street Preston 3072	(03) 8470 8575
Frankston	Children's Services Frankston City Council PO Box 490 Frankston 3199	(03) 9784 1751
Geelong	Family Services City of Greater Geelong Ariston, 245-249 Pakington Street Geelong 3220. PO Box 104, Geelong 3220.	(03) 522 0741
Greater Dandenong	Children, Youth and Family Services City of Greater Dandenong PO Box 200 Dandenong 3175	(03) 9239 5211
Hume/Broadmeadows	Broadmeadows Uniting Care 415 Camp Road Broadmeadows 3047	(03) 9309 3388
Latrobe	Family Services Latrobe City Council 141 Commercial Road Morwell 3840	(03) 5128 5651



Name	Address	Telephone
Maribyrnong	Family Services and Community Projects Maribyrnong City Council Napier Street Footscray 3011	(03) 9688 0200
Melton	Children's Services Melton Shire Council PO Box 21 Melton 3337	(03) 9747 7334
Mildura	Family Services Mildura City Council PO Box 105 Mildura 3502	(03) 5018 8276
Mornington Peninsula	Youth, Children and Family Services Mornington Peninsula Shire Private Bag 1000 Rosebud 3939	(03) 5950 1687
Moorabool	Children and Family Services Moorabool Shire Council PO Box 18 Ballan 3342	(03) 5366 7100
Nillumbik	Community Services Nillumbik Shire Council PO Box 476 Greensborough 3088	(03) 9433 3190
Robinvale	Robinvale Community Health Services Robinvale District Health Service PO Box 376 Robinvale 3549	(03) 5051 8160
Shepparton	Family and Children's Services City of Greater Shepparton 90 Welsford Street Shepparton 3632	(03) 5832 9782
South Coast (Bass Coast And South Gippsland)	Bass Coast Community Health Service Cnr Watt and Bilson Streets Wonthaggi 3995	(03) 5672 4999
	Kilmany Uniting Care 51(a) McCartin Street Leongatha 3953	(03) 5662 5150
Wellington	Kilmany Uniting Care 126 Raymond Street Sale 3850	(03) 5144 7777
Whittlesea	Whittlesea Early Years - Family Services Whittlesea City Council Locked Bag 1 Bundoora, MDC 3083	(03) 9217 2170

Name	Address	Telephone
Wyndham	Community Services Wyndham City Council 7 Bridge Street, Werribee 3030	(03) 8734 5466
Yarra Ranges	Family and Children's Services Shire of Yarra Ranges PO Box 105, Lilydale 3140	(03) 9294 6243
Aboriginal Best Start		
Tartu-nganyin Bopop Aboriginal Best Start	Dandenong and District Aborigines Cooperative Ltd. 3 Carroll Avenue, Dandenong 3175	(03) 9794 5973
Djillay Lidji Baw Baw/Latrobe (Morwell) Aboriginal Best Start	Djillay Lidji Aboriginal Best Start PO Box 250, Morwell 3840	(03) 5136 5105
Njernda Aboriginal Best Start	Njernda Aboriginal Best Start Program 84 Hare Street, Echuca 3564. PO Box 201, Echuca 3564.	(03) 5480 6252
Woolartbe Lidj East Gippsland Aboriginal Best Start Site	Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative PO Box 634, Bairnsdale 3875	(03) 5150 0720
Mingo Waloom Aboriginal Best Start Project	Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative Lot 62, Morgan Steet, North Geelong 3215	(03) 5272 2029
Delkaia Aboriginal Best Start Horsham and District	Community Services Wimmera Health Care Group Baillie Street, Horsham 3400	(03) 5381 9351
Aboriginal Best Start	Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Associations Limited - VACSAL 171 Smith Street , Fitzroy 3065	(03) 9416 4266

