



Early Start Kindergarten Grants

*How they work in long
day care centres*



Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) grants are available from the Victorian Government to long day care centres to support children to access free or low cost kindergarten in the two years before school.

The grants support the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children who are known to Child Protection. They are available as one-off annual payments, made directly to the centre for each eligible child and can be used when families are eligible for Australian Government assistance such as Child Care Benefit or Special Child Care Benefit.

What counts as a kindergarten program?

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.
- aligns with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework.

Your centre does not need to refer to the program as “kindergarten” to be eligible for ESK.

Can ESK 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) and 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 the child and family. In long day care settings children normally access ESK through attending two or three days per week.

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

Yes. As long as the program meets the requirements for a kindergarten program and meets ratio requirements under the National Regulations, it doesn’t matter how the age groups are configured. For example ESK could be used in a room for children aged 3 – 5 years or 0 – 5 years.

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, as long as it is in the child’s best interests and the decision to do this takes into account the child’s relationships with their peer group. If a child is younger than the majority of the children in a room, it is important that the teacher ensures their needs are met and that the education and care environment is supportive.

What about four-year-old children?

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

- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander OR
- have previously accessed an ESK grant OR
- have participated in a state-funded Access to Early Learning program (in selected localities).

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 school receive kindergarten per capita grants for each eligible four-year-old. The ESK extension grant is paid in addition to per capita funding, whereas three-years-old children are not eligible for per capita funding.

What funding is available for three-year-old children?

ESK grants are available to centres for each eligible child who turns three years old by 30th April in the year they are attending a kindergarten program and who:

- is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, OR
- has a current, or a history of, involvement with Child Protection, including those in Out-of-Home Care, or a child who has been referred by Child Protection to Child FIRST, Integrated Family Services or Services Connect.

Which long day care centres are eligible for ESK grants?

All long day care centres that deliver a kindergarten program are eligible. To receive the funding, your centre must have or enter into a service agreement with the Victorian Government to deliver a state-funded kindergarten program.

If your service already delivers a state-funded kindergarten program, you can apply for ESK through the Kindergarten Information Management (KIM) system.

If your service does not currently deliver a state-funded kindergarten program, but meets the eligibility criteria, you can enter into a service agreement with the Victorian Government. (See How do centres apply for ESK and ESK Extension Grants?)

The eligibility criteria are outlined in detail in the Kindergarten Funding Guide. Among other things, the service must:

- provide a kindergarten program as per the box above
- offer at least 15 hours per week for 40 weeks of the year, or 600 hours per year (e.g. 12.5 hours X 48 weeks)
- operate in accordance with Child Safe Standards.

How do we know if an individual child is eligible?

Advice of eligibility may be verbal (from a parent or carer) or can be written or verbal advice from a professional such as a case worker or Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO). Parents or guardians who identify a child as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander should not be asked to provide verification of this. Children in Out-of-Home Care are eligible for ESK and may be eligible for ESK extension grants, (call your regional DET if you are unsure).

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 24th January 2017 that this child is eligible for ESK grant as ..."

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

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

The Australian Government provides a range of fee assistance to families to support the participation of children in approved child care, such as long day care centres, including Child Care Benefit (CCB), Child Care Rebate (CCR), Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB) and Special Child Care Benefit (SCCB). Eligibility for these forms of assistance will depend on the parent or carer's particular circumstances. ESK grants can be used when families are eligible for all these types of fee assistance.

SCCB can cover up to the full cost of child care and is available to assist children at risk of serious abuse or neglect, or families in temporary financial hardship if the cost of care is a barrier to their participation in CCB-approved child care. It can be used to help eligible children and families enter CCB-approved child care, or to maintain or increase attendance. If a family is in receipt of SCCB, for part or all of the year, the centre is still eligible for the ESK grant.

ESK grants will continue to be available when the new Australian government fee subsidies are introduced in July 2018.

How do long day care centres manage ESK grants along with Australian Government assistance such as Child Care Benefit or Special Child Care Benefit?

ESK grants are administered by services separately from CCB and SCCB. They are one-off annual payments to centres that are not linked directly to families' accounts. Centres decide how to use these funds to ensure that the kindergarten program for eligible children is free. Centres will set up internal processes for tracking income and expenditure regarding ESK funding.

Ideally the ESK program will be delivered for 15 hours per week to maximise the learning and development opportunities. Where this is not possible, pro rata payments are available.

What can the ESK grants be spent on?

Funding is available to enable children to attend kindergarten two years before school, to improve access and overcome barriers to participation. Centres must use the funding to make sure that eligible children can attend the kindergarten program for 15 hours per week, for 40 weeks, or 600 hours across the year, at no cost to the family. Centres are also strongly encouraged to explore options that may be available that ensure hours of care outside the kindergarten program are also at no cost to the family/carer.

Centres use the grants in a variety of ways to achieve this. Some centres use the funds as part of their overall budget towards the cost of employing a teacher to work with the three-year-olds, others to cover shortfalls in specific families' accounts or to pay for additional costs like excursion fees. If the annual grant has been paid and a child has left the service prior to 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. The case studies illustrate the different ways that some service providers use the grants.

How do centres apply for ESK and ESK Extension Grants?

If long day care centres already have a service agreement with the Victorian State Government they can apply on line via the KIM system. If centres do not have a service agreement they should contact the relevant Victorian State Government DET regional office.

Case Study 1

"In 2015, we accessed Early Start Kindergarten grants for 3 children in our centre. Applying and accounting for the funds was straight forward and we had no trouble whatsoever with our claims.

Our service is part of an integrated Child and Family Centre with an 84 place early learning program and Maternal and Child Health services. We provide an integrated kindergarten program in our 3 – 5 year old room. Our fulltime degree qualified early childhood teacher runs the play based early learning program in the room four full days per week and has one non-contact planning day per week. The centre is open from 7:00am – 6:00pm and children's

hours of attendance vary to suit the family's needs.

We use this funding to support the delivery of our high-quality program, including the costs associated with employing the teacher. Families are charged our daily rate to attend but to date have all been eligible for Special Child Care Benefit, meaning they have no out of pocket expenses. The ESK funding helps us to offer at least 2 full years of integrated kindergarten, for children with complex needs."

– Long Day Care Service Coordinator

Case Study 2

"Because our Early Learning Centre operates as part of a fully integrated education and family support service, in a high need area, we usually have a number of children who qualify for ESK grants.

We have a truly integrated service and do not distinguish between children who attend for early learning, or kindergarten. Each child is provided with an individual learning plan designed to meet their needs, delivered by a degree trained teacher in each room, assisted by other qualified educators. We use the ESK grants to ensure that there are no barriers for the children to attend their early learning program. We keep a spreadsheet that tracks how much of the grant has been used to support each family. The

centre has low fees and for many families the gap [between the service daily rate and the fee assistance the families receive from the Australian Government] is only \$8.00 per day, which means that the ESK grant can sometimes cover all of the early learning expenses for the family across most of the year.

For some families, accessing Special Child Care Benefit can be a lengthy process; being able to access ESK means these children will not be disadvantaged in accessing early learning while the issues are resolved."

– Centre Director Early Learning

Case Study 3

A multi-site provider with centres in Victoria and in other states uses ESK grants primarily to pay for any gap fees that are not covered by Child Care Benefit or Special Child care Benefit.

The Family Accounts Team holds the funds and pays any fees that a family owes until the grant money is used up. This could include additional costs for excursions or resources the family needs to participate in the centre. If the whole amount of the ESK grant is not needed to cover the family's direct expenses surplus grant money is used specifically to support the centre in its work with children with complex needs or experiencing disadvantage. Examples of how the grants can be used in this instance include purchasing resources to support inclusion, professional development for staff about Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander culture and child protection or to support other families with complex needs to participate in 3 year old and 4 year old kindergarten.

"The ESK grants have been wonderful – they have meant that it has been possible for families to attend that wouldn't have been able to attend otherwise because they just could not afford to. No other States provide this. It has been straight forward to administer. Perhaps our biggest challenge with it is making sure that Centre Directors know enough about it and understand that it can be used in a long day care setting."

– Manager Multi-site Service Provider

Companion Resource Sheet:

Children in Out-of-Home Care –
Information for Long Day Care Centres

Contact

› Victorian State Government Department of Education and Training Regional Offices

For more information call an Early Childhood Performance and Planning Advisor located in each Department of Education and Training regional office. Phone the 1800 809 834 information line if you are unsure of the number or call 03 9637 2000 with general enquiries.

www.education.vic.gov.au > *About the Department* > *Contact Us* > *Regional Offices*

For More Information

› Child Care Service Handbook

Department of Education and Training

www.education.gov.au/child-care-service-handbook

› The Kindergarten Funding Guide

Department of Education and Training

www.education.vic.gov.au > *Early Childhood* > *For Service Providers* > *Funding and Grants* > *Kindergarten Funding Guide*

› Kindergarten Information Management System

Department of Education and Training

www.education.vic.gov.au > *Early Childhood* > *For Service Providers* > *Funding and Grants* > *Kindergarten Information Management (KIM) system*

Information for Parents and Carers

› What is Early Start Kindergarten?

www.education.vic.gov.au > *Early Childhood* > *For Parents* > *Kindergarten Programs* > *Early Start Kindergarten*

› Early Start Kindergarten for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children

www.education.vic.gov.au > *Early Childhood* > *For Parents* > *Kindergarten Programs* > *Early Start Kindergarten*

› Koorie Kids Shine at Kindergarten

www.education.vic.gov.au > *Early Childhood* > *For Parents* > *Kindergarten Programs* > *Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Children*

Community Child Care Association

Suite 08 and 09, 215 Bell Street, Preston Vic, 3072
Telephone 03 9486 3455 | Freecall 1800 177 017
Facsimile 03 9486 3271 | Email reception@cccinc.org.au

▶ www.cccinc.org.au



Education
and Training

