



Evaluation of Families as First Teachers: Final Report

Northern Territory Department of Education and Training

1 November 2024

This artwork, by Nouser Selina Swan Nungurrayi, a proud Kija, Ngardi-Jaru Woman from Halls Creek in WA, is inspired by the theme “We, Wit, Wisdom”. The three circles connect we, wit and wisdom side by side, with the connecting lines signifying the transcending and flexible ways in which we work. Reflecting traditional songlines, the artwork represents courage, connection, celebrations, ceremonies and healing.

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Nous Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians and the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, who maintain their culture, country and spiritual connection to the land, sea and community.

This artwork was developed by Marcus Lee Design to reflect Nous Group's Reconciliation Action Plan and our aspirations for respectful and productive engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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1 Executive Summary

Families as First Teachers (FaFT or 'the program') is a landmark program that delivers early learning and family support programs to young children and their families across the Northern Territory (NT or the Territory).

The Northern Territory faces unique, persistent challenges that demand a systemic response

The relative disadvantage of the NT's communities, particularly its remote Aboriginal communities, is well known. Despite decades of policy reforms to address inequities in education, employment, housing and health, the contrast in outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in the NT is as evident now as it was a generation ago. According to the most recent Closing the Gap data, performance in the NT against targets has gone backwards in a few areas, including employment, youth engagement, imprisonment, preschool enrolment and children being developmentally on track.¹

Against this backdrop, successive NT Governments have sought to break cycles of disadvantage by nurturing children in the early years so that they have strong foundations for success throughout life. One aspect of this has been investment in delivery of quality preschool programs in schools across the Territory.

A recent review (also by Nous Group) considered how to expand preschool in the NT, both in terms of increasing access to preschool programs and lifting participation so that all children – but particularly those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage – can access at least 15 hours a week of quality early learning. Among other things, the review recommended action to increase participation among priority cohorts through targeted local solutions to barriers to access.²

FaFT is an important complement to preschool. It creates an environment for children from birth to age four to learn foundational skills that, among other things, will support them to transition effectively to preschool and beyond. More than that, FaFT also equips families to be better informed carers and teachers, and to develop skills that can help them realise their own ambitions.

Families as First Teachers is an innovative program with broad objectives

FaFT aims to enhance children's lifelong education, promote their development and wellbeing, and support parents in their role as the child's first teacher. It is distinctive from other early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs in that it takes a holistic approach to meeting its objectives, including by:

- facilitating Aboriginal children's connection to their culture and sense of identity
- increasing parental capacity and confidence
- engaging with the community to ensure a responsive and relevant place-based approach, and
- equipping children with the skills and confidence to support successful transitions to preschool and engage in lifelong learning.

FaFT was introduced in 2009 as an innovative approach to improving learning and developmental outcomes for Aboriginal children from birth to age three in 21 remote communities. It has since expanded to 55 sites in total, including in urban locations. It has also extended participation to non-Aboriginal families and to children from birth to age four.

¹ Closing the Gap dashboard summary of progress for States and Territories [Productivity Commission - Closing the Gap Information Repository - Webinar Slides](#) p. 11

² Nous Group, NT Preschool Review – Final Report, accessible at [NT Preschool Review – Final Report](#)

The program is delivered by a Family Educator (FE) and a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) at each site, and is coordinated by schools with support and oversight from the NT Department of Education and Training (the Department). Under 2023-24 funding commitments, the NT Government (NTG) provides \$5.4 million per year for the program, while the Australian Government provides \$7.5 million. The average cost per enrolled child participant was \$5,145³, making it a relatively inexpensive program (compared with, for example, preschool delivery).⁴

The Abecedarian approach to quality adult-child interactions is a central feature

FaFT's design has evolved over time. Most notably, in 2013, it adapted to include the Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a). This is a strongly evidence-based pedagogical approach centred on building quality interactions between parents/carers and their children. Importantly, the intent is not solely to support quality interactions between the child and an educator, but to build the skills and confidence of caregivers at home to continue good learning and communication practices in that setting. As stated in the Gonski report of 2018, which cites FaFT as an example of how to promote greater parent and carer involvement in their child's learning, "(c)hildren who have been exposed to an engaging home learning environment in the early years are also more likely to achieve significantly higher National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results."⁵

The Abecedarian method has been deployed for some 50 years in a range of countries, but with a common focus on supporting early learning and development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Numerous studies have shown how it has contributed to both short and long term outcomes. For example, it significantly enhances cognitive development during the early years, and this continues to be evident through the primary and secondary grades. The most marked benefit of exposure to the Abecedarian approach is the greater likelihood of child participants continuing their education through school and beyond.⁶ The Australian adaptation of the Abecedarian method is core to FaFT's provision of quality child-centred learning.

Previous evaluations further contributed to the evidence base for the 3a methodology

Consistent with findings about the Abecedarian-based programs delivered elsewhere, the 3a method has been proven to be particularly effective in supporting children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia. For example, in a study of children aged 23 – 36 months participating in a 3a program, the lead researchers found there to be a "significant increase in (the participating children's) expressive and receptive language, and their initiation of joint attention behaviours" after three months.⁷

The FaFT program's design was heavily informed by research into the method and its application.⁸ Evidence was used to guide such decisions as how the sites should be staffed, how the workforce could be trained and supported to deliver the 3a strategies with fidelity, and how to ensure the educational program was culturally relevant.

The Department has continued to access and invest in research to assess progress and outcomes through the roll-out and expansion of FaFT. Findings from this previous work note that the following factors are among those which are key to achieving the program's objectives:

³ Calculated from the 2023 participation data and financial information provided by the Department.

⁴ Preschool delivery in the NT cost \$12,439 per student in 2022 per Victoria University analysis based on Productivity Commission, 'Report on Government Services: Tables 3A.6' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#) and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education, Australia' (2021) (TableBuilder) query, contained in the NT Preschool Review – Final Report 2023

⁵ Gonski, D et al, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, Australian Government, March 2018

⁶ Campbell, F. A. and Pungelo E. P. et al *Adult Outcomes as a Function of an Early Childhood Educational Program: An Abecedarian Project Follow-Up*, Development Psychology, July 2012, 48(4):1033-43

⁷ See Bookes, I and Tayler, C *Effects of an evidence-based intervention on the Australian English language development of a vulnerable group of young Aboriginal children*, Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, December 2016, 41(4): 4-15

⁸ More detail on this research appears in the literature review that accompanies this evaluation report.

- **Cultural and community responsiveness** – which includes tailoring delivery through embedded cultural content, building staff capacity, and fostering connections to the community.
- **Family engagement** – showing family members how they are supporting children’s learning, and providing resources to use at home.
- **Promoting participation** – undertaking outreach, promoting trust, incorporating or connecting to other services and structuring FaFT sessions to increase engagement over time.
- **Fidelity of implementation** – maintaining the integrity of 3a strategies while aligning with cultural priorities, supporting staff to be competent and confident in their roles, monitoring engagement and observing program effects.⁹

This evaluation considers FaFT’s appropriateness, its implementation, outcomes and areas for improvement

The Department commissioned Nous Group (Nous) to evaluate the design, implementation and outcomes of FaFT, and to produce insights to inform the program’s future evolution. Nous conducted the evaluation in partnership with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (Batchelor). Note that in this report, references to Nous (or ‘we’) are intended to include Batchelor, unless stated otherwise.

The scope of the evaluation included 40 of the total 55 urban, remote and very remote FaFT sites over the period from 2009 to 2023. It excluded the Learning with Families and Stay Play Learn sites as they have a different program design compared to the standard FaFT model.

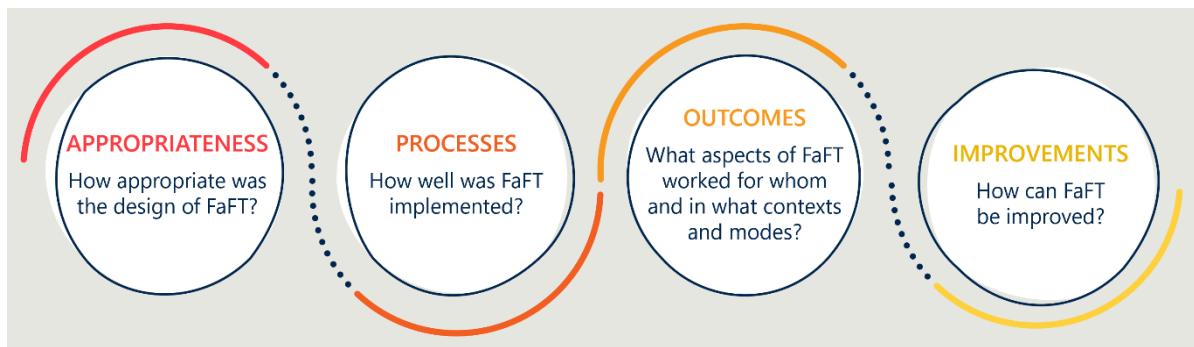
Nous took a theory-based approach, particularly with respect to assessing outcomes. This means that we have considered what happened as a result of FaFT compared to what we thought might happen, based on the research on likely outcomes from a program founded on the Abecedarian method and adapted to the NT context. In other words, in the absence of comprehensive data on the outcomes for FaFT participants and communities over time, we can look to the underlying evidence for the theory of change to draw reasonable conclusions about the likely effect of the program. These conclusions are informed by a range of other data sources that collectively lend weight and rigour to the findings.

The evaluation involved a mixed-methods data collection and analysis. We reviewed the literature to explore the evidence base for the FaFT model as well as contemporary thinking on best-practice early years and family supports (see the separate literature review report). We also reviewed program documentation and analysed the Department’s administrative data. Importantly, the evaluation involved extensive engagement with stakeholders through surveys, interviews and 12 site visits – the outputs of which were distilled through thematic analysis. Nous also prepared a separate, detailed case study of one FaFT community, Galiwin’ku, for the Department – the field work for which has also informed this evaluation.

These engagements were designed to ensure that the views of early childhood experts, school principals, FaFT staff, participating families, community members and service providers were reflected in the evaluation. Nous also engaged directly with relevant academic experts, notably Professor Jane Page, Dr Gary Robinson and Dr Sven Silburg.

This report presents the final evaluation findings and is structured into four sections, aligned to the primary evaluation questions overleaf.

⁹ Page, J., Murray, L., et al (2021). *Building a bridge to support the early learning of Aboriginal children in remote Northern Territory communities*. Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, REEaCh Hub



We provide an overview of the key findings in each of these areas below, with detail set out in the body of the report.

APPROPRIATENESS: FaFT’s adaptable and holistic program design enables a localised response to the needs of its target cohorts

FaFT’s holistic program design emphasises child-centred learning, parent capacity building and community engagement. This means it delivers the benefits of quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) while also building parental capacity and confidence in areas ranging from child development to health literacy, nutrition and hygiene. It does so through the work of FaFT’s FEs and FLOs and through partnerships with external providers such as local clinics and health specialists.

FaFT adheres to best practices, as identified in the evaluation’s literature review, for maintaining cultural appropriateness and cultural safety. For example, collaboration with the (now defunct) Indigenous Education Child and Parent Reference Group (IECPRG) ensured that Aboriginal communities’ child-rearing practices were supported and valued within the program’s design. Further, cultural safety is facilitated by the employment of FLOs from the local community, and the incorporation of local languages and cultural practices into FaFT activities.

There is a degree of flexibility to adapt the FaFT program to local priorities and delivery contexts without compromising core elements such as the 3a pedagogy. It gives an appropriate emphasis to empowering families and communities to express their preferences and shape program priorities at the local level. This supports a strong alignment to community needs and builds a sense of shared ownership. The consequence of this, however, is that it is important for there to be effective local governance to ensure equal pursuit of the full range of program goals, as set out in the FaFT Outcomes Framework, and performance monitoring that enables timely adjustments to the program delivery approach.

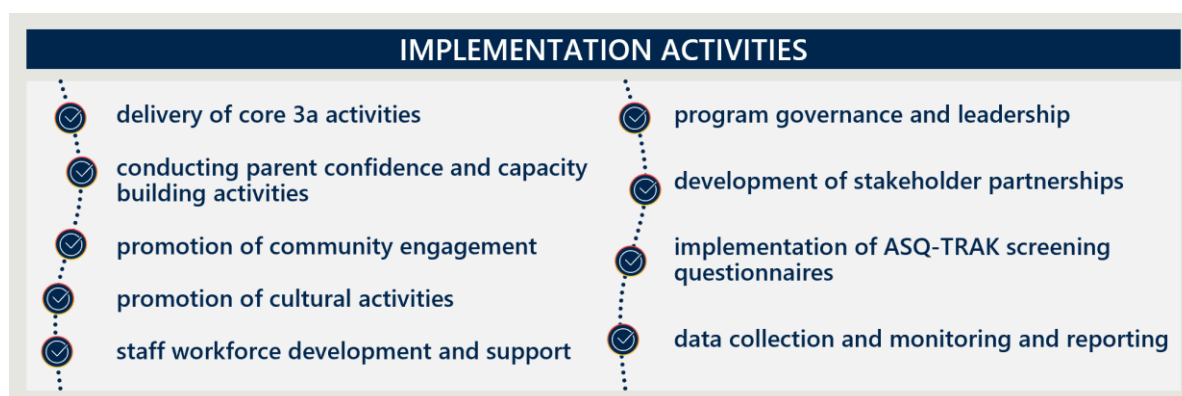
The program has been implemented with fidelity, particularly with respect to the 3a methodology and primacy of ensuring cultural appropriateness and safety. Of note is that, with the expansion of FaFT to non-remote sites (Ludmilla, Palmerston, Mimik-Ga, Katherine and Larapinta) the focus on Aboriginal cultures can be less evident, as most participants are non-Aboriginal. This is more of an implementation concern, pointing to the need to ensure appropriate community engagement and cultural safety measures (such as the co-design of activities and the use of culturally relevant material) and such that Aboriginal families feel safe and supported by urban FaFT sites. This is discussed further in Section 4 of the report.

PROCESSES: FaFT has achieved a wide reach, despite a range of implementation challenges

FaFT continued to operate in all of the sites where it has been rolled out. This is, in itself, an achievement given the inherent complexities of establishing new services particularly in remote communities of the NT. The evaluation found that the extension of the program to more sites has been largely successful, although there are instances where stakeholders argued that the roll-out was premature and reflected an underestimation of the challenges involved. Those challenges include thin markets for service providers

and qualified personnel; significant logistical challenges associated with serving remote communities; cultural and language barriers; and variable levels of trust in government authorities and programs.

With more experience comes learning, however, and the Department has benefited from several research studies that have informed thinking about implementation design and support. A key point from this evaluation is that significant preparatory work is required to establish and operate a FaFT site successfully. The main implementation activities are set out below.



The evaluation finds that FaFT has been implemented with fidelity to the core design elements – particularly the incorporation of the 3a pedagogy, which is central to the achievement of program outcomes, and commitment to cultural safety, parental capacity-building and community engagement. They have developed community partnerships to both support and enhance the impact of the program and, with the support of the Department, have provided training to staff to ensure cultural competency and confidence with the 3a methodology. Many have also provided employment opportunities for local parents, putting them on a path to other roles in FaFT or in schools. There is appetite for more training and potential to take a more strategic approach to developing the workforce.

All sites are required to align their strategies to the FaFT Outcomes Framework, against which they report progress on a termly basis. This reporting framework provides coherence to the program and helps focus effort. As noted above, flexibility in implementation was a positive feature of FaFT, enabling the program's design and delivery to align with the local needs and context. It follows that good governance, underpinned by effective data and monitoring, is required to ensure that outcomes are being pursued with appropriate effort and resources, and that any adjustments to strategy and activities can be made to improve performance. An example of where this is important arose with respect to there being (according to stakeholders we consulted) an undue focus at some sites on 'preschool readiness' as a driving outcome, over other equally important goals.

OUTCOMES: FaFT appears to be delivering positive outcomes to children, families, schools and communities

The evaluation found that many of FaFT's intended short-term outcomes have been achieved. The program has expanded accessibility to culturally appropriate and high-quality early learning, strengthened collaboration with service providers, and improved Aboriginal staff's knowledge of early learning and parental support. Higher performing FaFT sites have succeeded in facilitating positive parent and carer engagement with children.

With respect to long-term outcomes, there is strong qualitative evidence to suggest that several of these have been realised, such areas as strengthening child identity and connection to culture; supporting Aboriginal employment (with 50 Aboriginal employees currently engaged across all sites); increasing parental capacity and confidence; improving service integration; and facilitating children's transition to preschool.

These outcomes rely heavily on the extent of participation in the program, which is not as high as expected in some sites. This speaks to a broader challenge of promoting greater engagement in quality early learning and care in remote communities and so is not specific to FaFT. However, it also points to the unrealised potential of the program, at least in several of the sites studied. As an immediate goal, the evaluation proposes that there be focused effort to continually meet or exceed the performance benchmarks related to 'dosage' in the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment (NTRAI) Children and Schooling Implementation Plan extension agreement with the Australian Government.

In terms of children's long-term developmental outcomes, again there is a good deal of qualitative evidence. Family members, FaFT and school staff told us they had observed improvements that they attribute, at least in part, to the program. It is difficult to conclusively demonstrate this impact, due to the inconsistencies in how data is captured and interpreted (e.g. with respect to observations of parent/child interactions), and the variability in attendance (e.g. with some children participating very infrequently). There is also the challenge of not being able to observe home-based interactions with children, which are crucial to the achievement of outcomes.

The evaluation can, however, infer a great deal from the evidence base for FaFT – most particularly the observed effects of the Abecedarian method on child development. Being satisfied that the model, as adapted to the Australia and NT context, is consistent with approaches that have been proven to support long-term developmental outcomes, we can be confident that those outcomes are likely to be evident in later years (e.g. with respect to health and education), at least in communities where FaFT has been implemented effectively and with fidelity to the core elements of the model.

It should be noted, too, that the evaluation identified additional positive outcomes from the program, beyond those explicitly stated in the FaFT Outcomes Framework. These include the provision of social and emotional support to parents through fostering connections with each other. The only negative unintended consequence of FaFT reported was the potential risk of over-reliance by some participants on FaFT for basic supports, such as provision of breakfast and lunch for participating children and their carers. Such a view must be balanced against the value of providing incentives for families to engage with the program, and to access much-needed sustenance (even if this was not an explicit or primary objective of FaFT).

IMPROVEMENTS: FaFT can build on its distinctive strengths to increase impact

The evaluation identified five mutually reinforcing attributes that high-performing FaFT sites hold common, all of which have a strong thread of cultural safety through them. The five attributes are:

Rich understanding of parents and community | Where FaFT staff have a thorough understanding of the needs of participating parents, the circumstances of non-participant parents and the overall needs and dynamics of the community, the site is better able to cultivate a relevant and effective program. This understanding is fostered through ad hoc interactions with families through FaFT sessions, organised yarning circles with families and community and building relationships with key leaders in the community, including through partner organisations.

Strong local governance and support | Successful FaFT sites benefit from strong leadership and governance structures, both within schools and through the Department. In particular, where school principals understand and support the mission, scope and design of FaFT, sites are better positioned to fulfil their objectives. This can help create the authorising environment for FEs to be creative and adaptive in their program design (for example, running more outreach activities), and can bring institutional strength to build stronger partnerships with external agencies (rather than relying on the FE's personal relationships, creating a key person risk).

Effective engagement and outreach | Effective engagement and outreach help FaFT sites to connect with more families and make FaFT more accessible. These strategies were essential for reaching the more at-

risk, “hard-to-reach” families in the community. Strong engagement and outreach also increased the visibility of FaFT generally in the community, raising the profile and fostering greater interest amongst potential participants, including fathers and other male family members.

Safe and supportive spaces | Successful FaFT sites create a welcoming space where parents, particularly mothers, feel safe and supported. These sites give parents the opportunity to socialise and build relationships with each other, as well as with the FaFT staff. Many parents describe FaFT as a safe and trusting environment, and many staff observed that over time parents will generally look after each other’s children at FaFT and trust other parents to do the same. By developing strong relationships with each other, parents can support each other with the FaFT activities and more broadly.

Collaborative service partnerships | Building strong, collaborative partnerships between FaFT sites and other service providers and agencies operating in the community creates a mutually beneficial relationship. FaFT sites can gather useful information and data to support their programs and build their understanding of the community’s needs. Service providers and other partner agencies are able to have more meaningful and targeted engagements with the families participating in FaFT.

It follows that these aspects of the program should be nurtured and reinforced in order to deliver consistently strong outcomes. Doing that may require more than a continuation of ‘business-as-usual’ effort. Our assessment is that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the FaFT model is making a tangible difference to communities at a relatively low cost. However, to see more significant and enduring effects, the program likely needs more concentrated effort and resources to build on its key strengths (such as the vital role played by the FLO) and to address the identified risks and weaknesses (relating to, for example, data collection and use). These observations are reflected in the recommendations for departmental action set out below.

Nous notes that these will need to be considered alongside the recommendations relating to broader investments in early years development in the NT, including the Preschool Review.¹⁰



RECOMMENDATIONS

RE-AFFIRM THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF FAFT IN THE BROADER ECEC SYSTEM AND BACK THAT IN

1. Redouble commitment to the program, including through further investment in:
 - the number of FLOs and their professional development
 - the provision of stronger corporate support from the Department.

BUILD ON FAFT’S STRENGTHS BY SUPPORTING INCREASED PARTICIPATION

2. Set site-specific engagement goals (in addition to broad participation targets), informed by the views of FaFT staff and community members, and by analysis of barriers and opportunities.
3. Continue to identify and address barriers to participation in the program to achieve higher uptake and more consistent participation, including through more determined community engagement and targeted outreach activities at sites where this has fallen off.
4. Improve coverage within communities through a renewed focus on mobile and outreach services.

¹⁰ See in particular, Preschool Review Recommendation 2 (Prioritise action to increase participation among priority cohorts, through targeted local solutions to barriers to access), Recommendation 6 (Improve service integration) and Recommendation 12 (Invest in the capacity and capability of the early childhood workforce, particularly remote and Aboriginal staff)

ACTIVELY SUPPORT SITES THAT ARE STRUGGLING

5. Assess which sites are struggling with capacity constraints or the presence of insurmountable barriers.
6. Consider stepping-up investment in the low-performing sites and sites with significant challenges (e.g. homelands; large communities with transport and / or significant food security challenges).

STRENGTHEN FAFT GOVERNANCE

7. Ensure Aboriginal representation in the governance of FaFT sites, including through the use of existing school governance boards and/or the establishment of local community advisory bodies made up of local Aboriginal leaders.
8. Provide support to those governance groups to ensure they are seeking the right data and making good use of it to inform decisions and maintain program fidelity.
9. Continue to promote stronger links between FaFT sites and schools to more effectively monitor transitions to preschool.
10. Engage with and seek strategic input and involvement from APONT Aboriginal Education Steering Committee through regular briefings and consultation.

DEVELOP THE FAFT WORKFORCE AND WORKFORCE PIPELINE

11. Recruit multiple FLOs at sites with high numbers of eligible children, multiple languages or broad geographic coverage (e.g. homelands).
12. Develop a strategic and consistent approach to education and training for FLOs.
13. Provide strong career pathway options for FLOs (including becoming Family Educators or supporting transition to other related roles in the community).
14. Create additional opportunities other than annual conferences and regional forums for FaFT staff, including FLOs, to share learnings and widen their support networks.

UPDATE THE FAFT POLICY FRAMEWORK

15. Develop a clearer view on how the model should be varied for sites that do not serve a predominantly Aboriginal community.
16. Develop strong criteria for future site selection, that takes account of known barriers and enablers. This could take the form of a 'maturity' or 'readiness' matrix for communities to self-assess or be assessed against, with components covering, for example, levels of:
 - Need – the number of families with children in the target age range
 - Support – local community support, and interest of other services in partnerships
 - Capacity (physical) – available sites and facilities
 - Capacity (people) – available workforce
 - Leadership – local sponsors who can provide governance, including to develop strategy and monitor performance.

IMPROVE MONITORING OF FAFT OUTCOMES

17. Ensure that the proposed new evaluation framework fully reflects the outcomes FaFT is striving for and demonstrates relevance to strategic priorities such as Closing the Gap.
18. Take a more systematic view towards data collection and analysis, including to deepen

understanding of participation as well as key short-term outcomes (such as quantity and quality of interactions) and longer-term outcomes (such as preschool transitions).

19. Follow through on recommendations of the Menzies Centre study of the potential to link education and health datasets to deliver a more complete picture of child development outcomes.
20. Improve coordination between schools and the Department of Health in ASQ-TRAK screening, including with a view to improving information sharing, removing duplication of activities and avoiding unnecessary expense and burden on participating families.
21. Identify site-specific measures of success, reflecting key areas of focus, and track these closely, in conjunction with the relevant governance group.

2 The Evaluation Approach

This section outlines the overall approach to the evaluation, including:

- the objectives and scope of the evaluation
- ethical safeguards and cultural safety protocols used
- the methodology followed

2.1 The evaluation seeks to inform improvements to the program and future funding decisions

The Department commissioned a process and outcomes evaluation of FaFT to document and review the current state of the program and to identify opportunities for further improvement. This means our focus was on the inputs, activities and outputs of the program, and how they relate to the achievement of short- and long-term outcomes, as set out in the program logic in Figure 4 in Section 3.1.

No formal evaluation of FaFT had been conducted since 2010. This was a process evaluation only, undertaken shortly after the program's commencement. Since that time the program has expanded substantially, from 21 remote sites to 55 sites in 2023 (including three urban sites in Darwin and one urban site in Katherine).

Documenting and understanding the program's design, enablers, barriers, outcomes, and improvements through this evaluation is intended to support the Department in its future program design and implementation. Our analysis and findings will also input to the development of a case for continuing investment, noting that FaFT funding from the National Partnership Agreement on the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment (NTRAI) will expire on June 30, 2024. Finally, the evaluation ensures compliance with Section 45 of the Treasurer's Directions on Organisational Performance and Accountability.

The specific objectives of the evaluation, as specified by the Department were to:

- Document the impact of FaFT for children, families, schools, and communities.
- Ascertain the conditions for success for FaFT programs operating across the NT.
- Understand the factors that contributed to the success of FaFT from the perspective of stakeholders including parents, children, communities, researchers, practitioners and Departmental staff.
- Facilitate the development of an evaluation framework and key performance indicators for the continuation and potential further expansion of FaFT (to be undertaken separately).

The scope of the evaluation spanned the period 2009 – 2023 and encompassed 40 of the total 55 urban, remote and very remote FaFT sites. It excluded the Learning with Families and Stay Play Learn sites as they have a different program design to the standard FaFT model. A list of in-scope sites is included in Appendix B.

The evaluation was overseen by a steering group of departmental leaders, a working group of departmental staff, and an advisory group of Aboriginal staff from Nous, Batchelor, the Department and external representatives.

2.2 We adopted rigorous ethical safeguards and cultural safety protocols.

The evaluation methodology was informed by relevant ethical safeguards and cultural safety frameworks.¹¹ Nous approached the evaluation with an awareness of potential complexity and without an assumption of having a complete understanding in this regard. Each community is different with its own history, success and challenges. The evaluation sought and obtained ethical clearance through the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of NT Health and Menzies School of Health Research.

Cultural safety protocols adopted for the evaluation included:

- Clearly explaining the purpose and nature of each consultation to participants.
- Making stakeholders feel comfortable; for example, by giving them the choice of consultation in groups or one-on-one and the option to participate in informal settings.
- Conducting engagements with participants in the presence of a family liaison officer wherever possible, to build a trusting environment and to provide interpretation as needed.
- Ensuring all engagements with Aboriginal stakeholders were conducted by researchers with experience working with Aboriginal people.
- Providing stakeholders with contact details so they could communicate any further comments or questions after the consultations.
- Establishing an Aboriginal Advisory Group¹² to provide ethical and cultural advice to Nous.
- Ensuring the evaluation process built on the strengths and lived experience of Aboriginal evaluators.

Ethical safeguards adopted for the evaluation included:

- Aligning with relevant ethical and cultural safety frameworks¹³.
- Obtaining documented informed consent from everyone who participated in consultations during the site visits.
- Ensuring that all data collected was de-identified and not readily re-identifiable.
- Reporting results in the aggregate.

2.3 The evaluation took a mixed-methods research approach anchored in key evaluation questions

A mixed-methods approach was used to ensure evaluation of evidence from multiple sources. Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) structured and focused our data collection and analysis. They were tested and confirmed with the Department approved as part of the HREC ethical clearance referred to above in 2.2.

¹¹ For example, Gollan, S. and Stacey, K. (2021). Australian Evaluation Society First Nations Cultural Safety Framework. https://www.aes.asn.au/images/AES_FirstNations_Cultural_Framework_finalWEB_final.pdf

¹² The Aboriginal Advisory Group comprised of Aboriginal representatives from the Department, Batchelor Institute, Nous and external representatives with connection to early childhood education and care.

¹³ These included but were not limited to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018); the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council's Ethical Guidelines; the Australian Evaluation Society's Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluation; and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research.

2.3.1 The evaluation questions focused on FaFT's appropriateness, processes, outcomes and areas for improvement

Table 1 below outlines the KEQs used to guide consultations and the analysis of FaFT program data and documentation. For a complete list of evaluation questions (i.e. including the tertiary evaluation questions) see Appendix E.

Table 1 | Primary and secondary evaluation questions

Primary question	Secondary questions
Appropriateness: How appropriate was the design of FaFT?	• What needs does FaFT aim to address and for whom? • How does FaFT seek to address these needs for these cohorts? • In what ways is the FaFT program design appropriate to address these needs for these cohorts? • In what ways does FaFT ensure cultural safety and community accountability?
Processes: How well was FaFT implemented?	• What was the intended implementation process for FaFT? • How was FaFT implemented in practice, and how, if at all, did this differ from what was intended? • Did FaFT meet expected levels of reach, coverage and quality? Why or why not? • What were the enablers and barriers for implementation?
Outcomes: What aspects of FaFT worked for whom and in what contexts and modes?	• What were the outcomes of FaFT? • What were the causal mechanisms for the outcomes of FaFT? • What were the conditions for success for FaFT?
Improvements: How can FaFT be improved?	• How can the design of FaFT be improved? • How can the implementation of FaFT be improved? • How can the outcomes of FaFT be improved (e.g. by enhancing positive outcomes or mitigating negative outcomes)? • Are there changes that can be made external to the FaFT program to improve outcomes for the target cohort?

Because the data on outcomes proved to be less comprehensive than anticipated, Nous included a theory-based element to the evaluation. This means that we revisited the evidentiary basis for the key elements of the FaFT program to confirm our understanding that, if certain features are apparent, the desired outcomes could expect to be achieved. In other words, the evidence base enables us to draw reasonable inferences about the extent to which outcomes are likely to be achieved. This theory-based analysis, taken together with analysis of other leading indicators and available outcome data, enables us to build a strong sense of outcomes that can likely be attributed to FaFT participation.

2.3.2 Evidence was drawn from a review of documents and literature, site visits, consultations, surveys, demographic and administrative data

The evaluation drew on a range of data sources, summarised in Figure 1 and detailed further overleaf.

Figure 1 | Overview of evaluation evidence base

The evidence base for the evaluation included	DOCUMENTATION AND LITERATURE	QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH
	Documentation and reports on program design, implementation, outputs and outcomes Research on the design and outcomes of relevant early childhood and education programs, notably those featuring the Abecedarian approach	FaFT program staff NT Department of Education Children, families and communities Collaborating agencies and service providers Other stakeholders	Program data on program participation and activities including adult-child interactions. Administrative data on employment and funding Data on outcomes at a location/community level
Data was analysed through mixed methods	Document review Literature review	Thematic and comparative analysis Case studies	Descriptive statistics

The evaluation analysed program documentation and relevant literature

Nous closely reviewed a range of FaFT policy documents and guidelines including the Program Handbooks (2011, 2015 and 2017), FaFT Principles and Program Practice (2017 and 2018), and the FaFT Book (2020). Nous also considered the 2011 Menzies Process Evaluation, the FaFT Expansion Timeline Table, and the available Outcomes Framework Reports (Term 1, 2023) for the 12 sites that Nous visited.

We undertook a literature review that focused on:

- goals and strategies for best practice ECEC programs in Australia
- research into the efficacy of the Abecedarian method
- the implementation of 3a in the Northern Territory context
- elements of evidence-based practice in engaging with and delivering services to remote Aboriginal communities in particular.

The research discerned that evidence-based program design and implementation reflected a combination of what is known about the tenets of quality ECEC, the specific features of Abecedarian-based models that make them effective, and good practice related to alignment with local culture and community context. These are discussed in the literature review that accompanies this report and are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2 | Summary of key features of good practice to underpin FaFT

Quality ECEC tenets	Evidence-based 3a elements	Good practice in remote Aboriginal communities
Adopting holistic approaches	Fidelity to the program model	Incorporating local culture, language, knowledge and practice
Being responsive to children	Promoting quality adult-child interactions	Aligning early learning approaches with local socio-cultural practices

Quality ECEC tenets	Evidence-based 3a elements	Good practice in remote Aboriginal communities
Play-based learning with intentionality	Higher exposure to conversational reading and LearningGames®	Prioritising learning in language
Physical, temporal intellectual social and emotional learning environment	Coaching and support for parents to build skills	Adopting a strengths-based approach
Valuing cultural and social context of children and families		Ensuring local governance over design and delivery of ECEC
Continuity of experience and effective transitions		Using locally designed measures of success
Assessment and evaluation for learning, development and wellbeing		Building strong partnerships between early childhood educators and parents / carers
		Providing targeted and integrated family support

These became an important reference point for assessing the fidelity of FaFT's implementation, the appropriateness of its design, the outcomes which could be measured or anticipated, and any areas of improvement.

We examined administrative and demographic data

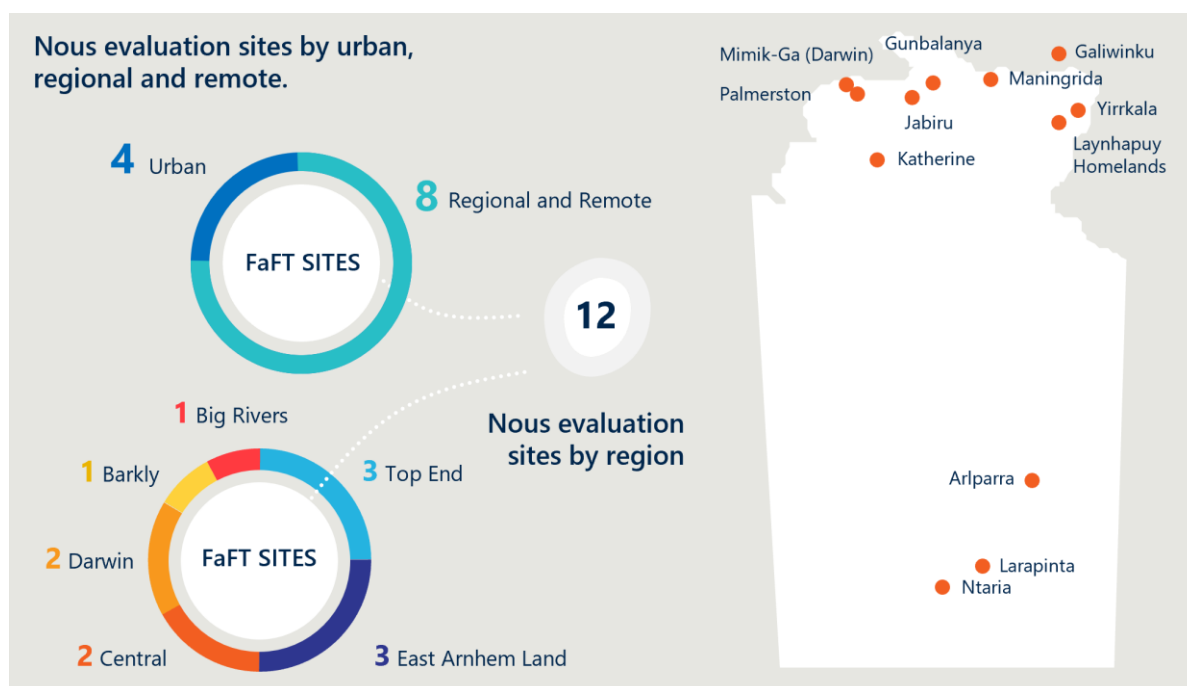
Key measures and data sources for the quantitative analysis included the following:

- Number of ASQ-TRAK screenings conducted (2019 – 2022).
- Number of children and parents participating in the program, by age, gender and Aboriginality (2015 – 2022).
- Average participation of children across all sites between (2015 – 2022).
- Number of activities undertaken to support FaFT delivery (2019 – 2022).
- Demographic data on Aboriginality of FaFT staff (2022).
- Participation data describing the total number of children participating and average child attendance per semester and per week for the 12 sites that the evaluation visited.
- 'Staircase' reports for the 12 sites that Nous visited, including average participation per week per site (2015 – 2023) and specific participation data per week per site for Term 2, 2022.
- NT preschool participation rates (2015 – 2023).
- Australian Early Development Census data (2009 – 2021).
- Nous survey of principals and FaFT staff.

The evaluation visited 12 sites

Nous visited 12 FaFT sites, recommended by the Department as a representative sample in terms of region, community size and the maturity of the FaFT program. The sites visited are shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2 | FaFT site visit distribution by remoteness and by region



A cross-section of experts, stakeholders, staff and beneficiaries of the FaFT program were consulted

Nous consulted with a broad range of people who had been actively involved in, or interacted with FaFT. In total we conducted 240 engagements across the two rounds of consultation, including focus groups and a survey¹⁴. The term 'stakeholders' is used in this report to refer collectively to those with whom we engaged, unless otherwise specified. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of stakeholder consulted.

Figure 3 | Number of stakeholders consulted by stakeholder group



¹⁴ Since the survey was anonymous there is a chance of minor duplication for the total number of stakeholders engaged.

Those consulted included:

Experts– Academics with expertise in early childhood programs, culturally appropriate developmental screening tools (including the ASQ-TRAK) and parental intervention programs across the NT and other jurisdictions with similar remote contexts.

Parents – These included parents and carers consulted at FaFT in the 12 sites visited for the evaluation. Most were mothers (who attend in much greater numbers than fathers¹⁵).

Service providers – Who partner with FaFT in areas such as health, literacy, employment and other early childhood and wellbeing programs.

Family Educators (FEs) – Staff members who are tasked with running the program at the sites Nous visited as well as those engaged in the staff survey.

Family Liaison Officer (FLOs) – Staff members who assist the FEs and guide the program’s cultural safety. FLOs were engaged in site visits, the staff survey and two dedicated focus groups.

FaFT Corporate staff – Tasked with the overall management of FaFT and program-wide support. They included both current and former corporate staff who were engaged through focus groups.

School principals – School principals at the site visits, as well as those who responded to the FaFT staff survey.

Community members – These stakeholders included local Aboriginal community members who discussed FaFT in the evaluation’s site visits.

2.3.3 The evaluation produced robust results against most KEQs, based primarily on qualitative data

Nous faced significant data limitations, particularly with respect to quantitative data. The main constraints and Nous’ strategies for overcoming them are set out in Table 3.

Table 3 | Evaluation limitations and mitigation strategies

Limitation	Mitigation(s)
Some data only available from 2015 – Data on activities, outputs and short-term outcomes, from the Department’s Early Childhood Programs Attendance System (ECPAS), dates from 2015 only.	Nous analysed available ECPAS data for the period 2015-2022 (three years beyond the initially defined timeframe of interest of 2009-2019).
Inconsistent quantitative data on parent-child interactions – The evaluation relied on existing quantitative data. The available ECPAS data includes measures of participation and engagement by families, number of outreach activities, but crucially does not include the degree and quality of interactions between children and families taking place during the delivery of FaFT. Moreover, there is not necessarily a consistent interpretation of what constitutes a noteworthy ‘interaction’.	Nous explored the quality of interactions through interviews and focus groups conducted at site visits, including a ‘deep dive’ case study of Galiwin’ku.

¹⁵ There were five fathers/grandfathers who were consulted out of the total number of parents and carers.

Limitation	Mitigation(s)
Limited quantitative data on long-term outcomes – For some of the intended long-term outcomes of FaFT, such as improvement in children’s learning and development, relevant data existed but could not be accessed in a format that enabled attribution to FaFT, noting in particular the very small sample sizes for most FaFT communities. For other outcomes, such as improvement in parenting capacity and confidence, relevant data did not exist. Linked data was not available to the evaluation team and is not captured under existing program data collection methods.	Nous analysed available quantitative data on FaFT’s activities, outputs and short-term outcomes and supplemented this with illustrative case studies. We revisited the literature on the evidentiary basis for key elements of the FaFT program so that we could draw reasonable inferences about outcomes through theory-based analysis. We also undertook deep case study analysis of one community to seek to develop a richer impact of outcomes over time for participating children and families.
Difficulty assessing implementation – The evaluation was conducted over a decade after the program was initially designed and implemented. This made it difficult to assess the implementation of the program, particularly in its early years, due to turn-over of staff and a lack of contemporaneous documentation.	Nous consulted key stakeholders who had been involved with FaFT in its early years, and reviewed all relevant documentation that was available.
Inability to recruit community-based researchers – Nous initially intended to conduct the site visits in partnership with local researchers. Such researchers were unavailable for the selected sites and dates.	Nous ensured attendance by Aboriginal members of the research team at the majority of site visits.¹⁶ Team-members worked closely with FaFT staff, including Family Liaison Officers (FLOs), at each site to ensure consultations were culturally safe.

¹⁶ This occurred in all sites with the exception of Palmerston, noting the majority of participating families at this site were non-Aboriginal.

3 Overview of the FaFT Program

This section provides a high-level outline of the FaFT program, including its:

- purpose and objectives
- program logic
- timeline of development and evolution
- core design elements
- approach to the evaluation.

3.1 FaFT is a place-based, holistic early childhood and parenting support program

At its core, FaFT is an early learning program designed to provide holistic support to young children, from birth to the year before schooling, and their families. It is delivered through a place-based approach that recognises the crucial role that families play in nurturing and growing healthy, strong and successful children¹⁷. Introduced in 2009, the program seeks to address the inequities experienced by Aboriginal children in the NT in terms of developmental milestones and educational outcomes, while concurrently recognising the need to maintain a develop a strong sense of identity and connection to culture. FaFT's stated objectives have changed over time, but have maintained a consistent focus. In 2015, they were articulated as follows¹⁸:

1. Provide quality early childhood programs with a focus on early literacy and numeracy foundations for young Indigenous children (birth to three years old) and their families¹⁹.
2. Prepare children and their families for successful transition to preschool.
3. Build capacity of families and community members to support the healthy development of young children.
4. Develop community-based resources and increase the availability of resources for learning and parenting programs.
5. Up-skill an Aboriginal workforce in knowledge of early learning and family support
6. Increase collaboration with partner agencies in service delivery.
7. Build capacity of communities to deliver early childhood services.

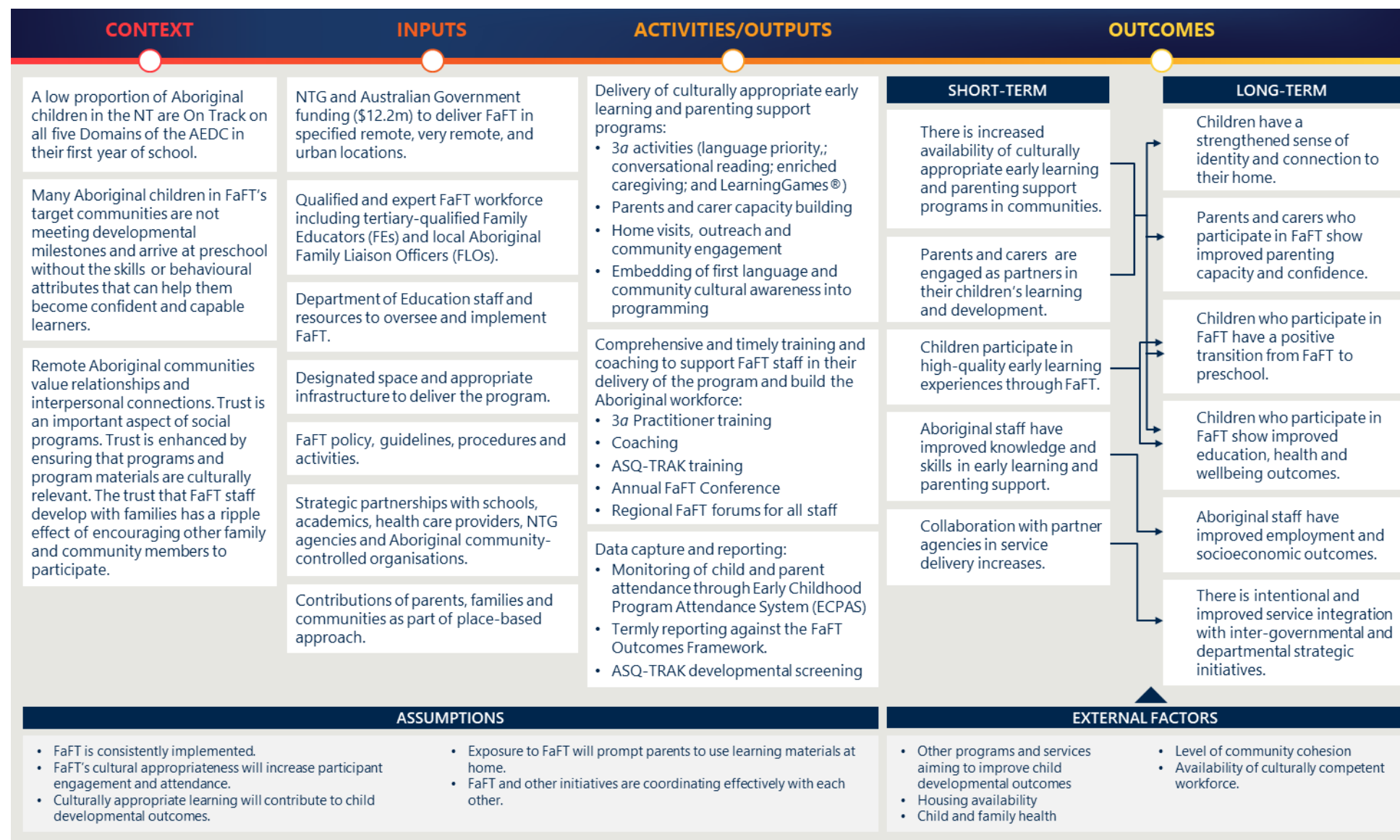
Figure 4 overleaf outlines the context, inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of FaFT in a program logic developed by Nous in consultation with the Department. This framework was used to structure and drive the evaluation.

¹⁷ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2020). FaFT Book, 1-32.

¹⁸ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2015). FaFT Handbook, 16.

¹⁹ The age eligibility expanded in 2019 from 'birth to three years old' to 'birth to four years old'

Figure 4 | FaFT program logic



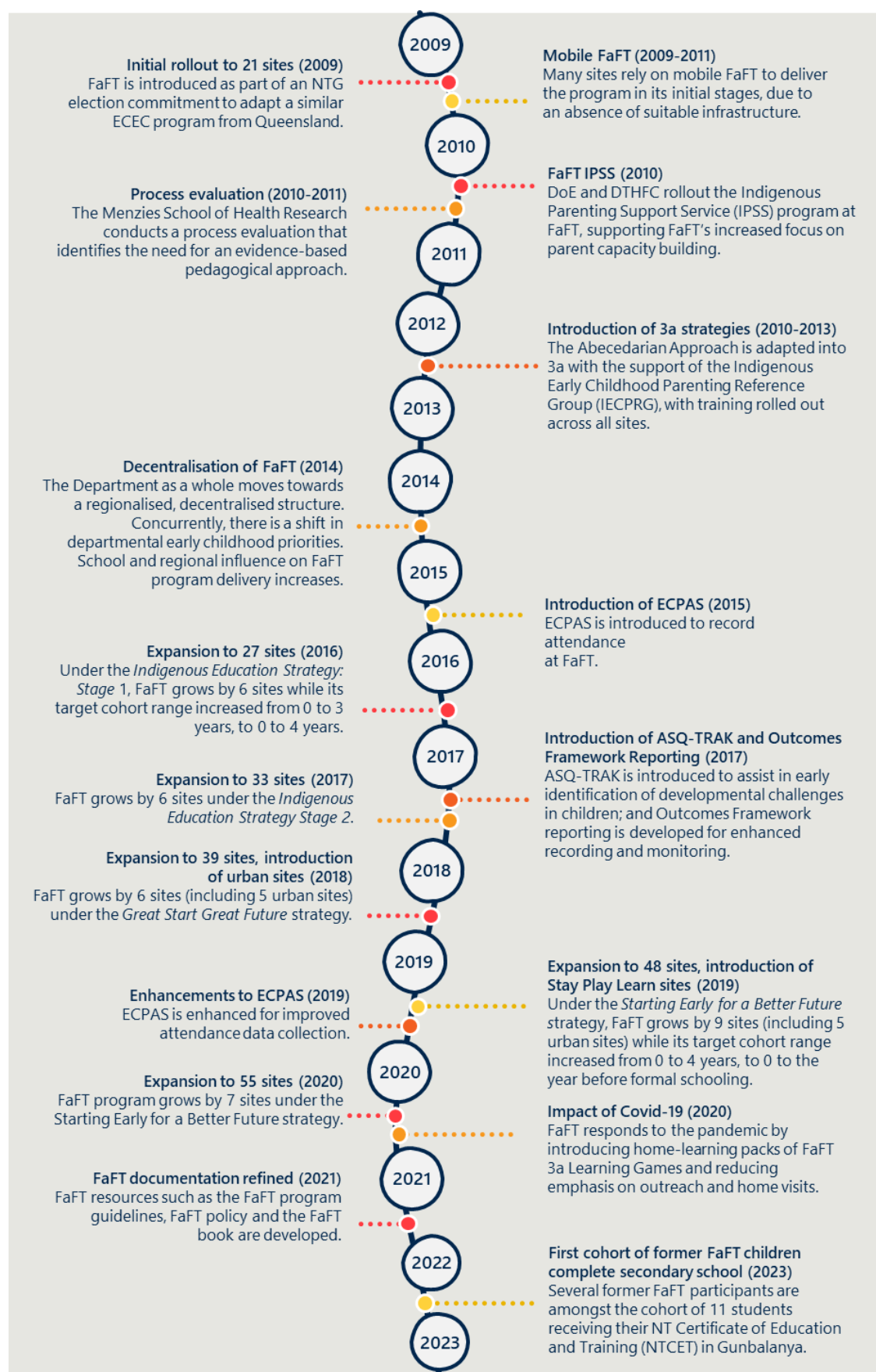
3.2 FaFT has evolved and expanded over time

Since its introduction in 2009, FaFT has expanded to increase its coverage across the NT in response to new strategies and election commitments. Over time, the number of sites increased from the original 21 to 55²⁰. FaFT has also expanded its remit to operate in five urban locations from 2018²¹. Concurrent with this expansion, there have been other adjustments to the program design – most importantly the introduction of 3a (discussed more in Section 4.2.4). Notable developments in the evolution and expansion of FaFT are shown in Figure 5 overleaf.

²⁰ This figure includes the 15 sites delivering the FaFT Learning with Families (LWF) and FaFT Stay Play Learn (SPL) programs, which are out of scope for this evaluation.

²¹ These five 'urban FaFT' sites are Ludmilla Primary School and Mimik-Ga Centre in Darwin, Palmerston Child and Family Centre in Palmerston, MacFarlane Primary School in Katherine, and Larapinta Child and Family Centre in Alice Springs.

Figure 5 | Timeline of FaFT evolution



3.3 There is a compelling need in the NT for a program like FaFT

As noted in the literature review that accompanies this evaluation, the benefits of quality ECEC are well-recognised. It contributes to the social, physical, emotional, personal, creative, and cognitive development of children during the crucially important period of brain development from birth to school age. Quality ECEC is characterised by the involvement of qualified educators who use a formalised learning framework, which is approved and regulated against the National Quality Standards and guided by the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).

First developed in 2009 by the Council of Australian Governments, the EYLF was informed by contemporary international research and evidence. In 2022, a new version was developed in consultation with the sector and released. It includes a vision that:

All children engage in learning that promotes confident and creative individuals and successful lifelong learners. All children are active and informed members of their communities with knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. ²²(Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p6)

The EYLF is based on three core tenets of 'Belonging, Being and Becoming'.

The importance of quality ECEC in relation to Aboriginal children is clearly recognised in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap through the inclusion of the following two targets focused on early childhood education:

- Outcome 3 – Children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- Outcome 4 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.

Across Australia, children are considered developmentally vulnerable if they score below the 10th percentile in any of the five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). The AEDC is a national survey held every three years for children in their first year of school across five domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge. Children falling between the 10th and 25th percentile in one or more of the five domains are considered 'developmentally at risk'.

In 2021, almost 40 per cent of children in the NT were developmentally vulnerable on more than one domain and only 16.4 per cent of Aboriginal children in the NT were developmentally on track. This demonstrates the need for quality programs tailored to the needs of developmentally vulnerable children, particularly Aboriginal children. This need is particularly necessary in remote communities where there is a lack of other services, such as quality childcare. Moreover, even where there may be services available, they may not necessarily be geared towards outcomes such as developing communication skills, or they may not commence early enough to allow for timely intervention to address emerging issues or risks in a child's development. This is an important part of the justification for investment in FaFT.

3.4 Core program design elements

FaFT is designed to provide access to a minimum of 20 hours of voluntary high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for children from birth to age four in addition to parental support services. The program works to build the trust of the local communities in which it operates, by engaging with the community, involving local family members in the design of activities, and by recognising the expertise

²² [The Early Years Learning Framework - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

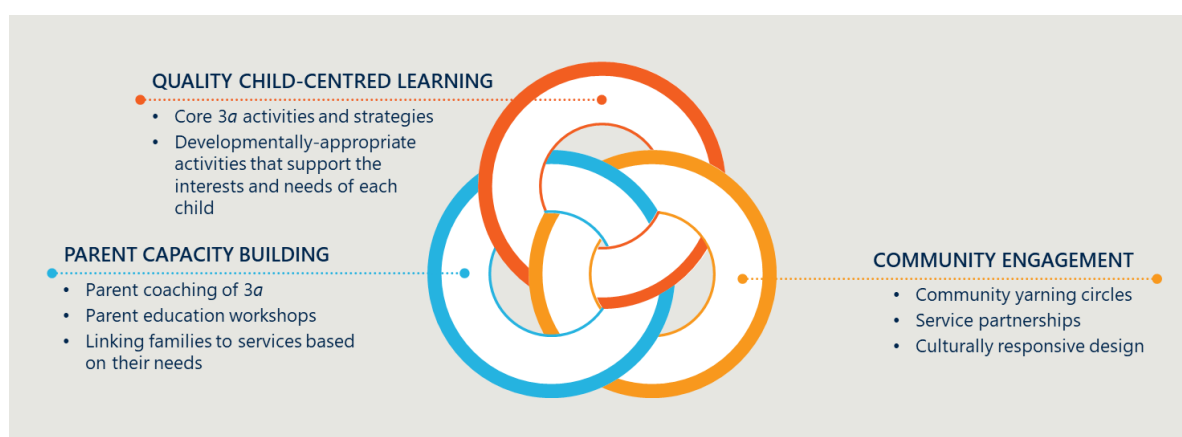
and experience of families in the early learning and development of their children. It is adaptable to different community characteristics and is designed to incorporate language and cultural reference to increase local relevance.

The program is delivered by FaFT educators, specifically:

- **Family Educators (FEs)** – tertiary degree qualified early childhood teachers who use pedagogical expertise to guide the FaFT program.
- **Family Liaison Officers (FLOs)** – local Aboriginal employees who use early childhood experience and relationships with local families to provide cultural context, expertise and support to participating families.

Three distinctive elements of the program are shown in Figure 6 and described in the following sections.

Figure 6 | Core FaFT design elements



The FaFT program does not prescribe a minimum level of ‘dosage’

As noted above, the operational design of FaFT requires sites to deliver the FaFT program for a minimum of 20 hours per week. This is a requirement to inform facility design, staffing and resources; it is not a target for ‘dosage’ – meaning the number of hours that children and carers are expected to participate.

In terms of dosage in the sense of participation, FaFT does not prescribe a specific minimum number of hours. That said, the NTRAI funding agreement includes a funding incentive to meet or exceed agreed baseline measures of average participation in the program per year. The baseline targets increased year on year from 2018 to 2021 (from 22 days per year to 29.3 days per year). Under an extension to the NTRAI funding for 2022 and 2023, the baseline targets appear to have been set at 22 per days per year for 2022 and 24.2 days per year for 2023. These baseline targets are distinct from the FaFT performance milestones that must be achieved under the NTRAI agreement (which are detailed further in section 3.6).

3.4.2 FaFT is designed to deliver quality child-centred learning through 3a

3a describes the set of learning strategies adapted by Professor Joseph Sparling and a team of researchers in the late 2000s to apply in an Australian ECEC context, giving providers and families a set of strategies to enhance child developmental outcomes through play-based interactions.²³ The Abecedarian approach was selected for adaptation due to its strong evidence base, which is detailed in the accompanying literature review. In short, it is considered one of the most successful early childhood interventions targeted at

²³ Page, J. et al. (2017). Victorian Advancing Early Learning (VAEL) Report.

vulnerable children and families, with over 30 years of evidence from various research projects, including randomised control trials (RCTs).²⁴

Developed in the USA in the 1970s to address the difference in school performance between children from low socio-economic families and communities and their more advantaged counterparts, the Abecedarian approach focused on delivering enriched, full day, year-round childcare. The early research showed significant positive effects on cognitive development from as young as 18 months, better literacy and numeracy abilities throughout school years, and a fourfold improvement in the rate of university graduation.²⁵

Subsequent studies looked at the application of the Abecedarian Approach in different settings, with varying modes of delivery, staffing arrangements and durations. These concluded that the Abecedarian approach could be effective among a range of children experiencing different vulnerabilities, including low-birth-weight babies, children with cerebral palsy and to children raised in orphanages.

The first three Abecedarian studies were RCTs and longitudinal studies, and form a key part of the evidence that high quality early childhood programs are highly effective. These RCTs contributed to an economic analysis by Nobel Laureate James Heckman that demonstrated the Abecedarian approach provides an economic return on investment of 13.7 per cent per year.²⁶

In 2010, the Abecedarian Approach was adapted for the Australian context through a collaboration between Professor Joseph Sparling and the University of Melbourne.²⁷ The resulting approach was termed the Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a). The adaptation identified concepts and language structures that both aligned with the core interactional qualities of Abecedarian teaching strategies and also matched the Australian English language and local cultures.²⁸ The LearningGames® were mapped to the EYLF child outcomes, principles and practices and the NQS Quality Areas as part of the 3a 'proof of concept'.

In 2010, an early process evaluation of FaFT recommended that the Department introduce an evidence-based pedagogical model to support consistency and quality improvement across FaFT sites.²⁹ The Department identified 3a as an appropriate model, due to the extensive evidence about the improved outcomes it was able to deliver, its adaptability to different contexts, the ability for it to be delivered in first language and low reliance on English literacy, and the incorporation of parents and carers into its delivery.³⁰

Over several years, extensive work was undertaken to introduce, adapt and embed 3a into the FaFT program. This included a customisation of the LearningGames® to better reflect the culture and environment in Aboriginal communities, and to improve accessibility through use of visual elements to overcome literacy barriers. This customisation was overseen by an Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group (IECPRG) established by the Department. This period of adaptation also included ongoing, iterative professional development for staff in the use of 3a strategies, and in coaching and mentoring strategies to support parents.³¹

²⁴ Cooke, L. and Piers-Blundell, A. (2019). Embedding Evidence-Based Practice into a Remote Indigenous Early Learning and Parenting Program: A Systematic Approach, *Literacy Education and Indigenous Australians*, Language Policy 19.

²⁵ Sparling, J. & Meunier, K. (2019) *Abecedarian: An Early Childhood Education Approach that has a Rich History and a Vibrant Present*. International Journal of Early Childhood 51, 207-216.

²⁶ Garcia, J. L., Heckman, J. J., Leaf, D. E., & Prados, M. J. (2016). The life-cycle benefits of an influential early childhood program (Working Paper 22993). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research

²⁷ Cooke, L. and Piers-Blundell, A. (2019). Embedding Evidence-Based Practice into a Remote Indigenous Early Learning and Parenting Program: A Systematic Approach, *Literacy Education and Indigenous Australians*, Language Policy 19.

²⁸ Pilsworth, N., MacBean, C., Tayler, C., Page, J., Eadie, P. & Niklas, F. (2017). *Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study Final Report*. University of Melbourne.

²⁹ Cooke and Piers-Blundell, *ibid*

³⁰ Abraham G., and Piers-Blundell A. (2012). *Early Childhood Matters – Sharing the Vision*, ARNEC Connections, No. 6 2012;

³¹ Cooke and Piers-Blundell, *ibid*

3a encompasses four types of activities, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 | Core 3a Activities³²

Activity	Details
Conversational reading	Conversational reading promotes high-quality adult-child interactions, which have been found to support a young child's early social, cognitive and language development. ³³ Conversational reading focuses on building vocabulary, comprehension and expressive language through back-and-forth interactions that mimic conversation. The 3S (See, Show, Say) strategy is used by the adult to elicit a behavioural or verbal response from a child; for example, pointing to a picture of a kangaroo and saying, 'see the kangaroo'; encouraging the child to show where the kangaroo is; or encouraging the child to say the word 'kangaroo'. This strategy allows children of any age to respond successfully according to their level of capability. Critical to the success of this strategy is the idea of Joint Attention which involves the adult attuning to a common focus with the child, and gradually supporting the child to attune to the adult's attention.
Learning games	LearningGames® are playful, child centred experiences designed to engage children in learning from birth. They consist of short, individual adult-child interactions with educational value. There are 200 scientifically proven games designed to address the social-emotional, language, cognitive and physical developmental needs of each child. ³⁴ Activities and games are specifically chosen and frequently implemented based on the understanding of a specific child's development and interests. The LearningGames® are designed to be able to be used anywhere at any time and do not usually require special equipment or materials. The original LearningGames® have been adapted in consultation with members of remote Northern Territory communities to produce NT LearningGames®, a more culturally and linguistically responsive version of the games. Each child is intended to experience at least one learning game per FaFT playgroup session, and each learning game should incorporate at least four back-and-forth interactions. The learning games are age appropriate for the children.
Enriched care-giving	Enriched caregiving encourages families to use common daily routines as a vehicle for intentional, individual and frequent adult-child interactions. Family members are encouraged to turn daily routine activities into occasions which comprise a component of care, learning and emotional connection. It is supported through the 3C (Care, Connection, Content) strategy which not only enables educational content such as colours, processes, emotions, sizes, shapes and new vocabulary to be integrated into caregiving routines but continues to build the nurturing relationship between adult and child. Parents engage with their child while undertaking daily activities such as cooking. In this example, the parent would describe the ingredients and steps of the recipe to their child. Children in turn are encouraged to describe and count items that they see.
Language priority	Language priority allows language stimulation to be woven through different activities throughout the day. This is done using a broad vocabulary and applying the 'three Ns' technique (notice, nudge and narrate). A 'notice' event is where a parent observes what a child is doing or trying to do; a 'nudge' event is where a parent prompts the child or asks for more information; and a 'narrate' event is where the parent describes what is happening. This is a flexible activity that allows for conversational interactions to arise naturally from a variety of situations. FaFT sites aim to prioritise a child's first language (including local Aboriginal languages where this is the case) in all language priority activities.

In 2011 the Department commenced a roll-out of training to FaFT staff across all active sites, which from 2013 formally began using 3a strategies.

³² Ibid.

³³ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2020). FaFT Book, 10-17.

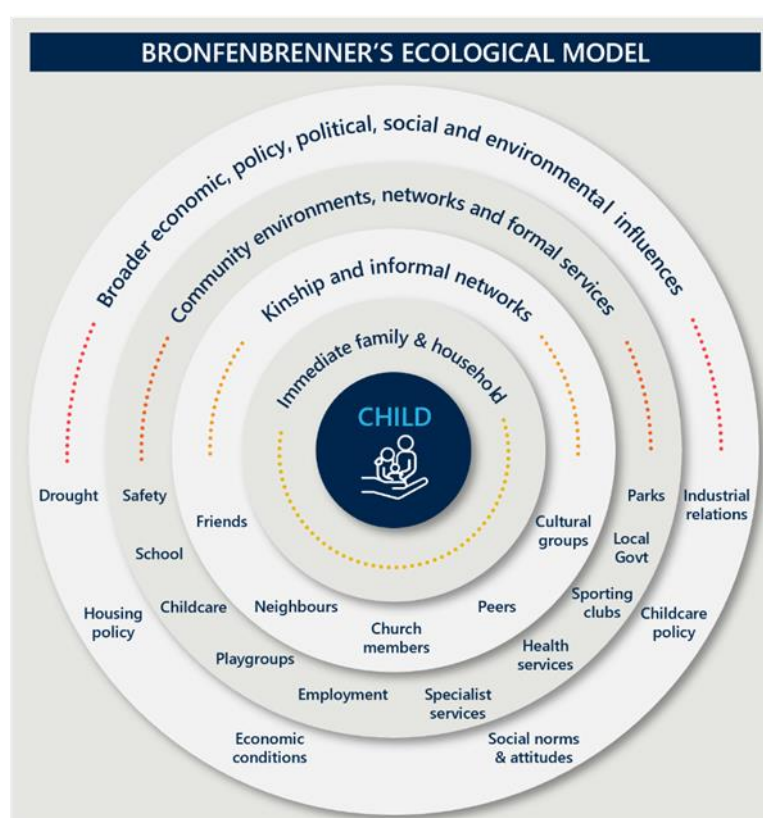
³⁴ Page, J et al. (2019). An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 233-250.

3.4.3 FaFT seeks to build parental capacity and confidence

FaFT's design applies Bronfenbrenner's ecological model³⁵ which describes how different aspects of a child's environment can influence their development, as depicted in Figure 7 below. This distinguishes the program's design from other ECEC services in its holistic view of children's developmental circumstances and influences. FaFT aims to support a child's microsystem (their immediate environment) by building parent capacity and confidence through coaching parents in 3a and holding parent education workshops.

On the former, FaFT staff guide parents to undertake and master core 3a activities, and to apply the strategies and activities in the home environment. This means that the actual program 'dosage' is higher than what is recorded in terms of a child's attendance at a FaFT program site and serves to further improve the child's development.³⁶

Figure 7 | Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development



FaFT's parent education workshops are designed to help both families create a better environment for their children and bolster parents' confidence in dealing with the challenges of raising young children. Workshop activities can include:

- **Nutritional learning** – FaFT aims to assist younger and newer parents by guiding them through an infant's developmental milestones; for example, when to introduce solid food. Nutritional learning also seeks to guide families to make healthier dietary choices.

³⁵ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2020). FaFT Book, 10-17; see also Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2015) FaFT Program Handbook, 12.

³⁶ Page, J et al. (2019). An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 233-250

- **Health and hygiene literacy** – Workshops that build health literacy are designed to inform parents about the early intervention and prevention of diseases, including chronic diseases.
- **Navigating relevant services** – Workshops are often coordinated with external partners such as the local clinic, NT Health, or other service providers, and are designed to help families build confidence to independently access relevant services.
- **Budgeting** – FaFT advises parents on how to manage their finances, as many families that the program caters for are socio-economically vulnerable.

Community engagement is an important focus of FaFT, especially as participation is voluntary. The program design therefore features activities to increase community awareness, trust and understanding of FaFT. Targeted community engagement activities help raise the profile and extend the reach of the program. FaFT educators collaborate with local partners to make the core elements of the program aligned to the cultural context and relevant to the specific needs of the community. They undertake promotional and outreach activities, and enter into formal arrangements with community organisations. For example, many FaFT sites partner with the local health clinic to share data and information, identify potential families who are not already engaged with FaFT, and coordinate delivery of health programs within FaFT. Many also partner with local rangers to help deliver Learning on Country programs and share knowledge in traditional land-management.

"The core elements are similar, but you know, there's a local flavour to each program." – School principal

Community engagement, outreach, feedback, and input also serves to help FaFT sites better understand the local needs of the community and adapt the program accordingly. This increases the degree of community ownership of and trust in the FaFT program. Yarning

circles with community members are intended to be used to provide feedback to understand what Elders and families value in their child's learning.³⁷ This feature in the program's design was intended as a continuous quality improvement strategy to ensure cultural safety and build a growing understanding of Aboriginal child-rearing practices.

3.5 Each FaFT site aspires to achieve seven outcomes

Under an Outcomes Framework for FaFT, introduced in 2017, each site needs to design and deliver its program to achieve the following outcomes.

1. All families are strong and empowered as partners in their children's learning and development.
2. Children participate in high quality early learning experiences.
3. Children participate in literacy and numeracy experiences at home.
4. Children make a positive transition to FaFT and between FaFT and preschool.
5. Children are developmentally on track.
6. Culturally appropriate service delivery and partnerships.
7. FaFT programs are delivered by a confident and qualified local workforce.

These outcomes are reflected in the program logic in Figure 4.

There is a requirement that sites report progress towards these outcomes, for the purposes both of improving local delivery, and to enable whole-of-program monitoring and evaluation by the Department.

³⁷ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2020). FaFT Book, 1-17.

The reports, prepared each term, enable the sites to outline key activities, success and challenges as well as observed impacts. It also invites the sites to think about next steps to achieve the outcomes.

3.6 FaFT is a jointly funded program that is cost-effective by comparison to preschool

FaFT is a key project under both the Northern Territory Government's Indigenous Education Strategy (2015-2024) and the Australian Government's NTRAI National Partnership Agreement, which includes the Children and Schooling Implementation Plan. The Northern Territory and the Australian Governments work in partnership to deliver the FaFT programs in specified remote and very remote locations under the NTRAI.

In the 2023-24 financial year, the Northern Territory Government provided \$5.4 million towards FaFT, while the Australian Government provided \$7.5 million. The NTRAI Children and Schooling Implementation Plan performance milestones (for 2022, 2023 and 2024) are as follows:

- Continued operation of Families as First Teachers (FaFT) in 32 sites.
- Each FaFT program is delivered at least three days per week.
- A minimum of 1700 children supported by their families are enrolled in FaFT programs.

The NT Government provides top-up funding as required.

The total funding provides for the following outputs:

- payment of salaries for FE and FLO to deliver program
- payment of salaries for FaFT corporate staff to provide program support
- purchasing materials
- maintenance of infrastructure
- general administrative costs
- training and development activities
- travel costs for staff.

The majority of these outputs are paid for directly by the Department; however, each school receives additional funding through grants, including an initial establishment grant and subsequent operational grants. New sites receive a one-off establishment grant of \$20,000. Existing sites receive an operational grant to enable the ongoing operation of the program, calculated by reference to the number of children accessing the services, as outlined below:

- 1-9 children accessing services, operational grant is \$5,000
- 10-25 children accessing services, operational grant is \$10,000
- 26-50 children accessing services, operational grant is \$12,500
- 51-75 children accessing services, operational grant is \$15,000
- 76-100 children accessing services, operational grant is \$17,500
- 101-125 children accessing services, operational grant is \$20,000
- 126-150 children accessing services, operational grant is \$22,500
- 151-175 children accessing services, operational grant is \$25,000

- 176 – 200 children accessing services, operational grant is \$27,500

Some schools allocate their own funding for additional outputs on top of those directly funded through FaFT funding. Examples include providing school buses for FaFT activities, or allocating additional playgroup leaders and assistant teachers to support FaFT groups.

With respect to the latter, this was found to be particularly important in homelands sites where communities are spread out and only receive visits from FaFT staff around once a week rather than daily. In such circumstances, schools have been known to allocate non-FaFT staff to coordinate the program on days when the FaFT staff are not present. Such contributions are generally not captured in the FaFT expenditure reports.

The evaluation notes that the costs of FaFT compare favourably to government preschools. In 2023, there were 2507 children participants in FaFT. The total cost of delivering FaFT was \$12.9 million and so the average cost per enrolled child participant was \$5,145³⁸ (albeit not all children participate daily). By comparison, 3223 children were enrolled in preschool in the NT in 2002, with approximately 2550 children enrolled in either Government preschool or a mix of Government preschool and other centre based day-care. The total cost to the NT Government of delivering preschool was \$39 million.³⁹ The total NT Government preschool expenditure per enrolled child was therefore \$12,439.⁴⁰

FaFT sites are block funded rather than demand-based. There are no quotas or classroom caps for FaFT sites; however, under the National Partnership Agreement on NTRAI there is a milestone objective of 1700 children participating across 32 remote and very remote FaFT sites.⁴¹

Preschool funding to government schools is based on each school's enrolment levels, calculated through the Department's School Resourcing Model (SRM). The SRM funds preschool in government schools through per-child amounts of between \$6,792 and \$16,313 per year, depending on child and school characteristics. There are measures to allow for additional loadings for priority cohorts e.g. children with additional needs and children in remote locations.

Other preschool settings (e.g. preschool delivered through non-government centre-based care providers) receive minor and indirect funding such as the Early Childhood Services Subsidy. However, these funding sources average less than 10 per cent of the equivalent funding provided per child from the SRM to government preschools.

In both cases (preschool and FaFT) there is a significant difference between the number of children who enrol and the number who participate regularly. The challenges with maintaining consistent participation in FaFT are discussed further in section 6.2.2.

³⁸ Noting that not all enrolled students actively participate in the program.

³⁹ <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

⁴⁰ Victoria University analysis based on Productivity Commission, 'Report on Government Services: Tables 3A.6' (2023). Available at [\[link\]](#) and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Preschool Education, Australia' (2021) (TableBuilder) query, contained in the NT Preschool Review – Final Report 2023

⁴¹ Urban sites are excluded as they are not funded under the National Partnership Agreement on NTRAI.

4 Appropriateness

This section describes the

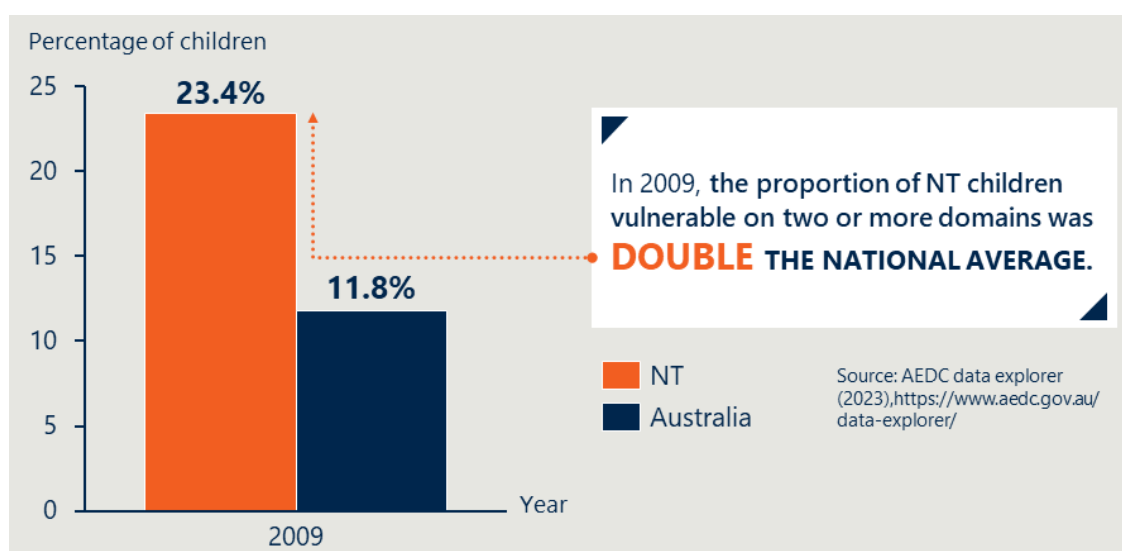
- profound and enduring differences in developmental outcomes that provided the impetus for FaFT
- the elements of FaFT design that specifically address developmental vulnerability
- FaFT program design's focus on cultural safety
- the process of adapting FaFT to delivery in urban settings

4.1 FaFT was a response to profound and enduring differences in developmental outcomes for Aboriginal children in the NT

As noted earlier, FaFT was developed and introduced in 2009 to address the ongoing inequality experienced by Aboriginal children in the NT, building on the NT Government's strategic intent outlined in *All Children Have the Best Possible Start: A Framework for Action*⁴² and aligning with the NTG's 2008 *Transforming Indigenous Education* strategy, which had a focus on early learning. It was adapted from a similar place-based program in Queensland, coordinated by Dr Kathryn Mannion in collaboration with Djabuguya Elder Rosetta Brim.

The need for a program like FaFT was evident from the data on education and health outcomes for Aboriginal children, particularly in remote communities. The proportion of children in the NT who were regarded as 'vulnerable' on two or more developmental domains in 2009 was more than double the proportion nationally, as outlined in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8 | Comparison of NT and Australian children vulnerable on two or more domains in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2009



⁴² A joint policy framework developed by the NT Department of Health and Community Services and the Department of Employment, Education and Training in 2005.

The 2011 Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) report *Improving Educational Outcomes in the Northern Territory* observed that “low average student performance levels in the Territory, particularly among Indigenous students, have their origins in the years before school. While conclusions about average student progress across the school years are complicated by declining enrolment rates, the available evidence suggests that, once in school, students in the NT make good average progress. The problem is that a large percentage of children begin school significantly behind the rest of Australia and never catch up.”⁴³

The report goes on to note that the causes of this lag include limited proficiency in English prior to school, and health problems. On the latter, the disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the NT were very evident at the time of FaFT’s launch, with the following ailments featuring among Aboriginal children in the NT’s remote areas:

- **Hearing loss** – a cross-sectional study conducted in 2005 found that around 30 per cent of Aboriginal children 0-9 years in Central Australia and around 20 per cent in the rest of the Northern Territory had severe middle ear disease,⁴⁴ which can result in permanent hearing impairment or loss. This can affect children’s development – particularly with respect to speech and language – wellbeing, behaviour and educational achievement.⁴⁵
- **Skin disease** – Aboriginal children throughout the NT experience elevated rates of skin diseases such as scabies, and impetigo (skin sores).⁴⁶ One study in two East Arnhem land health clinics, conducted in the period 2002-05, found that 92 per cent of children in these communities visited the health clinic for a scabies or a sores-related issue.⁴⁷ This can have serious long-term consequences as scabies and sores are linked with chronic heart and kidney disease.⁴⁸
- **Respiratory issues** – Another study, conducted between 1997-2005, found that the rates of pneumonia in Aboriginal children hospitalised in the NT were among the highest in the world.⁴⁹ Such respiratory conditions are linked to illnesses such as chronic pulmonary disease.⁵⁰
- **Iron deficiency** – Further research found that the prevalence of anaemia is disproportionately high in Aboriginal children living in remote NT. In the NT, up to 25 per cent of children aged between six months and five years old were found to be anaemic. The study suggested also that the negative impact of Iron Deficiency Anaemia on young children may have long term negative impacts on physical, behavioural and cognitive development.⁵¹

FaFT was designed to help address these and other health issues affecting Aboriginal children through parental capacity building workshops, including education on prevention and treatment strategies. It was also intended to connect families with health providers and services through its integrated partnerships.

⁴³ Masters, G. N. (2011). *Improving educational outcomes in the Northern Territory: Preliminary advice to the Northern Territory Department of Education and Training*, with a particular focus on the ongoing improvement of students’ literacy and numeracy achievements. Melbourne, VIC: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

⁴⁴ Morris, S. (2005). Otitis media in young Aboriginal children from remote communities in Northern and Central Australia: a cross-sectional survey, *BMC Paediatrics*.

⁴⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) *Ear health and hearing loss among Indigenous children*.

⁴⁶ Davidson, L. (2020) .Skin infection in Australian Aboriginal children: a narrative review, *Med. J. Aust.* 212(5), 231-237

⁴⁷ Lucas, D. et al. (2008) Disease burden and health-care clinic attendances for young children in remote Aboriginal communities of northern Australia, *WHO*, 86(4), 275-28

⁴⁸ Andrews et al. (2009). A regional initiative to reduce skin infections amongst Aboriginal Children living in Remote Communities of the Northern Territory, Australia, *PLoS Negl Trop Dis*, 24(3)

⁴⁹ O’Grady et al. (2010). Rates of radiologically confirmed pneumonia as defined by the World Health Organisation in Northern Territory Indigenous children. *Med J Aust*, 192(10), 592-595

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Kearns, T. et al. (2017). Anaemia health literacy of community members and health practitioners knowledge of best practice guidelines in a remote Australian Aboriginal community. *Universal Journal of Public Health*, 5(1). 32-39

4.2 Several elements of FaFT demonstrate its appropriateness to addressing the identified needs and challenges

To assess the appropriateness of the program's design to meet children's health, education and other developmental needs in remote areas of the NT, the evaluation considered the evidence base for the model, including the adaptation to the NT of the Abecedarian approach, and the key elements of good practice identified in the literature review. On the latter, we pay particular attention to the level of community input into decision-making, and the focus on successful transition to preschool as a key objective of the program. We also considered stakeholders' views on appropriateness to meeting needs.

4.2.1 3a is a proven, adaptable method of early learning

The use of 3a methodology is targeted to addressing developmental challenges and providing a strong foundation for future educational success. Its place at the centre of the FaFT program is regarded as appropriate based on the following:

- **Strong evidence base** – the Abecedarian approach, from which 3a was adapted, has a strong track record, with decades of research having been conducted into the theory and its application across many countries around the world.⁵² This research included three longitudinal randomised control trials, reflecting the highest standards of evaluation rigour.⁵³ Further, this evidence base has continued to be strengthened through lengthy and detailed research, including a four-year Australian Research Council study that produced multiple publications addressing different research questions. The Department has engaged closely with findings from this and other, related research in the interest of continual learning and improvement.
- **Adaptability to local contexts** – the Abecedarian approach can be implemented flexibly, under the guidance of local leadership, in a variety of delivery settings, and across different countries with diverse cultures and languages⁵⁴. There is a repository of research that draws out the efficacy of the method in the different contexts.⁵⁵ Australian research, for example, has demonstrated the value of incorporating cultural knowledge, languages, concepts and skills into the learning – value in terms of empowering families and giving them agency, as well as fostering young children's self-esteem, pride and confidence.⁵⁶ The simplicity of the 3a learning strategies (outlined in 3.4.2) allows them to be applied easily in the home environment, helped by the fact that they can be readily adapted into Aboriginal languages⁵⁷.
- **Suitability for disadvantaged communities** – research on the effectiveness of the Abecedarian approach delivered to children in socially disadvantaged families has clearly demonstrated significant improvement in cognitive development, educational outcomes and life course variables. Specifically, an aggregation of 10 studies showed that Abecedarian-based interventions produced a decline in: grade repetition, depression, smoking and drug use and adolescent parenthood (among other

⁵² Loeb S., et al. (2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centres on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education review* 26 (1). 52-66.

⁵³ For an overview of the findings from these trials, see Ramey, C.T. (2018). *The Abecedarian Approach to Social, Educational, and Health Disparities*, Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review 21, 527-544

⁵⁴ Sparling, J & Meunier, K. (2019). Abecedarian: An Early Childhood Education Approach that has a Rich History and a Vibrant Present, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 207–216.

⁵⁵ See the Abecedarian Education Foundation's website <https://www.aefglobal.org/research>

⁵⁶ See Gapany, D., Murukun, M., Goveas, J., Dhurrkay, J., Burarrwanga, V., & Page, J. (2022). *Empowering Aboriginal Families as Their Children's First Teachers of Cultural Knowledge, Languages and Identity at Galiwin'ku FaFT Playgroup*. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 47(1), 20-31.

⁵⁷ Page, J et al (2019). An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 233 – 250 at 244.

benefits). At the same time, increases were observed in areas such as cognitive skills, reading and maths skills, social competence, engagement in schooling and further education and the adoption of a healthy lifestyle.⁵⁸

As we found in the literature review, the centrality of the Abecedarian approach to the FaFT program is well-justified. Its relationship to the tenets of quality ECEC – notably the importance of play-based learning and valuing of cultural and social contexts – suggests it is highly appropriate. The 3a model, building on this method, was purposefully designed for the types of children and communities which FaFT serves. The appropriateness of its execution is evident from the incorporation of key elements of good practice, as set out in Table 5 below.

Table 5 | Summary of key features of good practice to inform an assessment of FaFT’s appropriateness

Quality ECEC tenets	Evidence-based 3a elements	Good practice in remote Aboriginal communities
Adopting holistic approaches	Fidelity to the program model	Incorporating local culture, language, knowledge and practice
Being responsive to children	Promoting quality adult-child interactions	Aligning early learning approaches with local socio-cultural practices
Play-based learning with intentionality	Higher exposure to conversational reading and LearningGames®	Prioritising learning in language
Physical, temporal intellectual social and emotional learning	Coaching and support for parents to build skills	Adopting a strengths-based approach
Valuing cultural and social context of children and families		Ensuring local governance over design and delivery of ECEC
Continuity of experience and effective transitions		Using locally designed measures of success
Assessment and evaluation for learning, development and wellbeing		Building strong partnerships between early childhood educators and parents / carers
		Providing targeted and integrated family support

4.2.2 The holistic design reflects all aspects of developmental vulnerability

Families from marginalised socioeconomic communities benefit from accessing high quality ECEC and parental services.⁵⁹ Such programs, of which FaFT is a key example, have multiple potential benefits, including providing children with nurturing care that promotes health and wellbeing; creating a safe environment outside of the home to foster a sense of security and build resilience; and improving cognitive and social skills. How these benefits manifest through FaFT is outlined in Table 6 overleaf.

⁵⁸ Abecedarian Education Foundation, [Research | AEF Global](#)

⁵⁹ Smith Family, (2019). Interim report: Preschool Attendance Strategies Project 1-5; see also Luby et al., (2022) Environmental Conditions to Promote Healthy Childhood /Behavioural Development: Informing Early Preventative Interventions for Delivering in Routine Care. *Biological Psychiatry GOS.*, 2,3. 1-9.

Table 6 | Ways in which a holistic approach reduces developmental vulnerability

Providing nurturing care	Nurturing care encompasses behaviours and knowledge in child upbringing, including child health, hygiene, nutrition, social stimulation and forming bonds. ⁶⁰ It generates life-long benefits such as an increased ability to learn, a greater sense of community, improved educational outcomes and neurological development. The home environment is the most important context for nurturing care.	FaFT promotes nurturing care through using the 3a strategies (in particular, enriched caregiving); facilitating partnerships with external service providers; and conducting parental capacity building workshops (e.g. nutritional support).
Fostering a safe environment	Brain development in the early years is particularly susceptible to severe stress. This can lead to negative behavioural and health problems in the long-term. ⁶¹ Early childhood educators can help children build their resilience by creating a safe space with structured routines and activities.	FaFT helps foster a safe environment by establishing welcoming, inclusive and culturally safe learning spaces.
Developing cognitive and social skills	Quality ECEC can help enhance a child's long-term cognitive and social skills, particularly for children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. Longitudinal evaluations of the Abecedarian Project and the Perry Preschool Project demonstrated sustained positive effects on disadvantaged children's cognitive and social growth. ⁶²	FaFT helps develop cognitive and social skills through: 3a's focus on adult/child interactions, the use of ASQ-TRAK to support early intervention, confidence building activities.

4.2.3 There is a strong focus on building relationships and trust with the local community

As noted in Table 5 and in the literature review, engagement with the community is a key element of program efficacy and therefore an important consideration when assessing appropriateness. FaFT is intended to be embedded in the local community supported by partnerships with local stakeholders. There is a strong focus on promoting awareness of the program and inviting parents and other community members to contribute to local program design and implementation.

Community engagement is seen as a two-way process, and as a means, in part, to build trust. It is predicated on the need to understand local needs and dynamics to provide a responsive, tailored service. Community engagement at FaFT sites has led to the following adjustments to the program in different locations, each reflecting local input:

- Incorporating more cultural and on-Country activities, such as hunting and fishing, which are then adapted to utilise 3a strategies.
- Aligning FaFT cultural activities with the broader school's cultural curriculum, as set by the school's governance board (which is made up of Aboriginal members of the local community).
- Connecting FaFT mothers with a community-based women's cultural hub to provide social and emotional wellbeing support in response to an identified need in the community.

⁶⁰ Black, M., et al. (2020). The principles of Nurturing Care promote human capital and mitigate adversities from preconception through adolescence. *BMJ Global Health*. 1-9.

⁶¹ Sciaraffa, M. et al. (2018). Understanding and promoting Resilience in the context of Adverse Childhood Experiences. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 46(3) 343-353.

⁶² Loeb S., et al. (2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centres on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education review* 26 (1). 52-66.

- Identifying and responding to external factors that can impact children's development, such as housing policy, community safety, infrastructure, and local employment.
- Sharing information with the local health clinic to share data and information, identify potential families who are not already engaged with FaFT, and coordinate delivery of health programs within FaFT.
- Encouraging the participation of fathers in FaFT programs in a culturally respectful manner.
- Adapting and producing resources, including books and songs, in language.

4.2.4 FaFT's design supports children's successful transition to preschool

FaFT is designed to work with families, communities and schools to facilitate a child's transition to preschool in the context of relatively low rates of preschool participation and attendance among Aboriginal children in the NT.

FaFT documentation defines 'preschool readiness' as both a child's stage of developmental maturity and the extent to which preschools are enabling children to participate in learning experiences. FaFT sessions are designed to

promote preschool and make it more accessible for children. Most FaFT sites conduct regular orientation visits to familiarise children with the preschool environment.

FaFT aims to ensure children become "confident and capable learners", before beginning preschool, by advancing children's command of:

- **Routines and expectations** – this includes applying routines to become more familiar with the expectations of preschool. For example, regularly attending, following instructions, and learning how to self-regulate emotions.
- **Relationship skills** – this helps children become preschool ready by making them more sociable and teaching them important concepts around sharing and fairness.
- **Literacy and numeracy skills** – educational, developmentally-appropriate skills that assist children become preschool ready.

Additionally, FaFT supports families by building their capacity to support their children's development and empowering them to engage confidently in their child's ongoing learning.

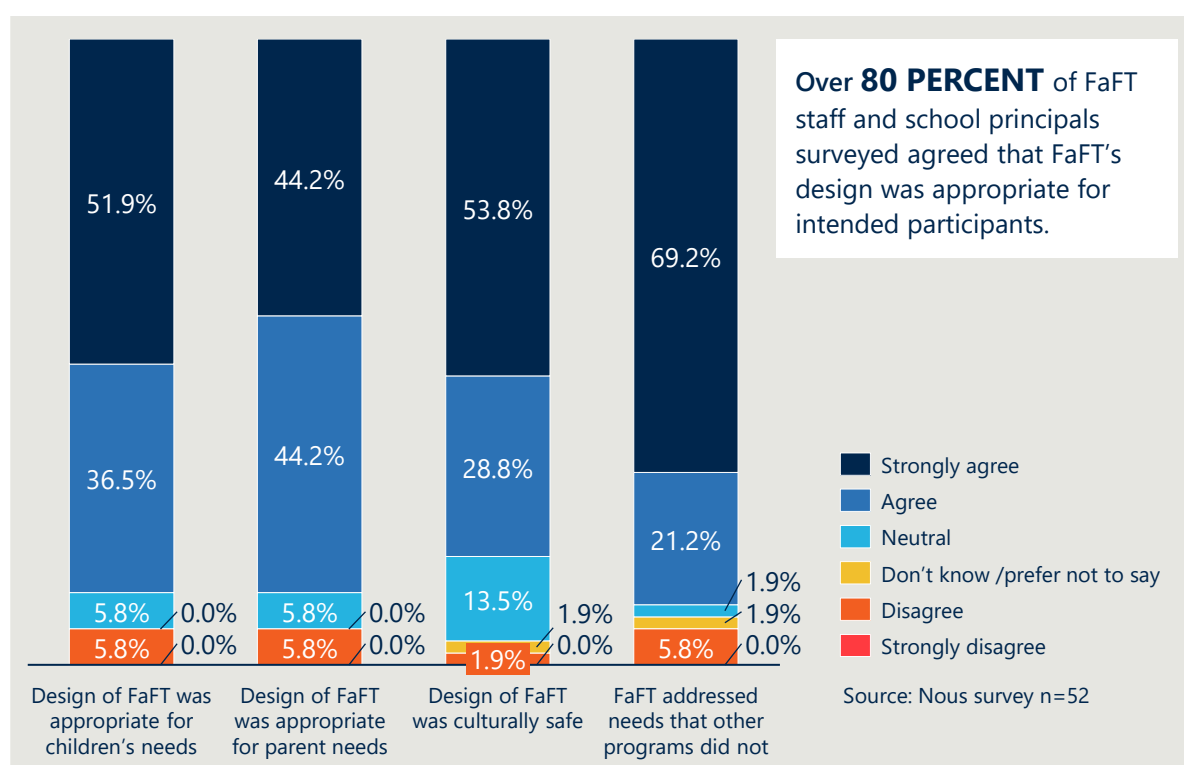
"I think it's very relevant and gets everyone started, children from birth to three years of age, gets them started on that progression towards coming to school in a formal way." – FaFT Staff member

4.2.5 Most stakeholders agreed that FaFT meets participant needs

Over 80 per cent of FaFT staff and principals consulted said the design of FaFT was appropriate to addressing the needs of participants and community. Figure 9 presents survey responses relating to the program's appropriateness.

"More than anything else is the fact the program can be delivered in language and tailored to local cultural and community needs." – Expert stakeholder

Figure 9 | FaFT staff and principals' perceptions of design appropriateness in meeting family needs



From broader stakeholder engagement we know that views on appropriateness derive from a range of considerations, including the following aspect of the program (not an exhaustive list):

- **Pedagogy** – FaFT staff and service providers praised the use of the 3a approach (for example, activities that were designed to be age-appropriate and culturally safe).
- **ASQ-TRAK** – FaFT Staff and service providers shared that ASQ-TRAK developmental screening supports families to identify developmental issues early.
- **Referral to other services** – Stakeholders shared that many families participating in FaFT are referred to other services from which they can benefit, including health and social services.
- **Parent confidence development** – FaFT staff and service providers frequently emphasised the importance of FaFT's commitment to assisting parents to develop greater confidence in their capacity.
- **Identification of neurodiversity** – Several stakeholder groups highlighted the ability of FaFT to facilitate early identification of neurodiversity and referral to appropriate supports.
- **Suitability to remote contexts** – FLOs and many service partners said FaFT's activities were appropriate for remote contexts.
- **Data collection** – expert early childhood and health academic stakeholders said the program's efforts to collect meaningful data distinguished it from playgroup programs.

Several stakeholders felt that the appropriateness of FaFT's overall design overall had been undermined by changes in the program's balance of priorities. Specifically, several expressed concern about an increasing focus on the objective of preschool readiness. For some school principals, service providers and FaFT staff, such a focus risked a perception that FaFT functioned as another layer of schooling rather than as a specialised ECEC program. However, the evaluation found that these views were not supported by analysis

of trends in the prioritisation of preschool readiness across the FaFT sites. According to program documentation, preschool readiness has featured in most iterations of FaFT (albeit with different levels of emphasis).⁶³ Certainly, there is no indication among these documents that program design had elevated the importance of preschool readiness such that it 'crowded out' provision of other parent and child services.

4.3 The program design also appropriately puts cultural safety at the centre

Stakeholders agreed that the design of FaFT promotes cultural safety, citing this as one of the main features that made the program appropriate for families. They commented that cultural safety was incorporated into the program's design through: Aboriginal oversight of program design; the role of the FLO; use of a developmental screening tool adapted to the remote Aboriginal context; and culturally sound pedagogy that emphasises the use of the child's first language. These points are discussed below.

The design of FaFT also promotes cultural safety through strong community engagement, which is discussed in Section 4.2.3.

'Relevance and cultural safety are crucial, it has to be meaningful, and you have to see yourself in the program.' - Expert stakeholder

4.3.1 The Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group (IECPRG) provided input at key stages of program design

As noted above (Table 5), incorporating local culture, language, knowledge and practice is a critical success factor for a program such as FaFT. In support of this goal, the Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group (IECPRG) was formed in 2010 by the Department in partnership with the then Department of Health and Families. It was tasked with engaging stakeholders from across the NT to enhance the design, development and implementation of the FaFT program and resources. The IECPRG comprised representatives of remote regions and met four times each year.

IECPRG's scope was to provide expert advice to the FaFT program and the Department regarding:

- strategic directions and design of FaFT programs to improve outcomes for remote Aboriginal children and families
- how FaFT builds on Aboriginal child rearing and parenting practices
- appropriate models of service delivery to remote Aboriginal families
- culturally relevant resource development
- the promotion of community awareness of early childhood initiatives in the NT

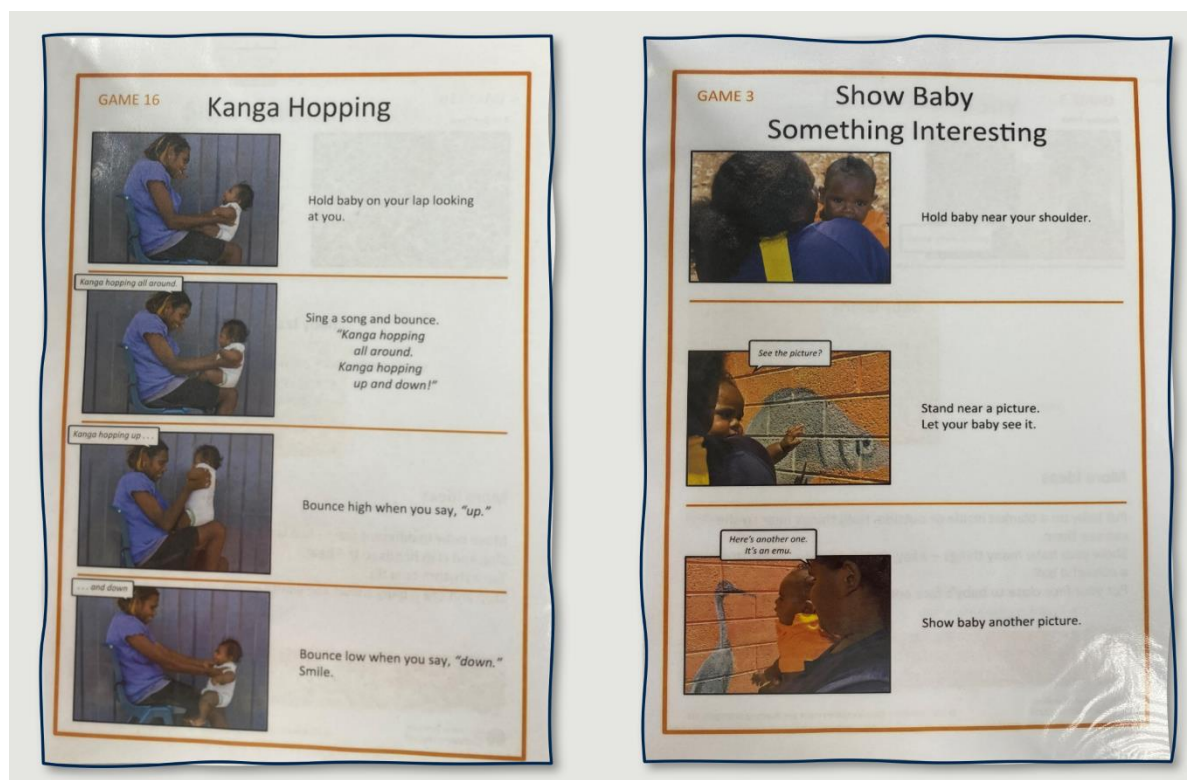
IECPRG ceased in August 2018 due to the program reaching a point where evidence-based strategies (3a) and ASQ-TRAK developmental screening were being developed and implemented under the guidance and cultural expertise of participants. The work moved to a focus on embedding these practices in programs.

During its period of operation, one of the key activities of the IECPRG was to review and approve the modified 3a learning games to ensure cultural relevance in the NT context. These were adapted from the

⁶³ FaFT IPSS 2010 mentions the importance of preschool transition, but it becomes a "non-negotiable" FaFT principle in the 2015 Program Handbook, it is then implied in the 2020 FaFT Book (although still a key feature in the Outcomes Framework Reports).

original 3a suite of games to include culturally relevant pictures of Aboriginal families⁶⁴ and a greater use of visuals, facilitated by photoshoots across 15 remote FaFT sites⁶⁵, including pictures of local plants, animals, and items common in remote communities. Figure 10 below provides two examples of culturally adapted learning games (noting there are many other examples of similar adapted games in the FaFT program).

Figure 10 | Culturally adapted learning games



Adapting these games and making them more accessible encourages their continued use in family home environments. The learning games and other 3a educational materials also feature visuals and diagrams which help map out sequences in learning processes and support Aboriginal ways of knowing. According to Tyson Yunkaporta, using visual representations helps present educational material as a 'learning journey river that runs through the community' which connects the home with the school.⁶⁶ Family members engaged through the evaluation's site visits often observed that the 3a guides and learning games were culturally appropriate and easy to use at home.

One of the other key outputs of the IECPRG was to identify a set of guiding principles to help ensure Aboriginal parenting practices are incorporated into all areas of the FaFT program. This list, entitled 'Important Family Beliefs About Growing Up Strong Indigenous Kids' covers the following:

- Children participating in FaFT need to be taught by their mother and father in language; take part in traditional ceremonies and dancing; be taught the difference between right and wrong, and to be loving and caring; and taught about surviving in the bush, bush safety and general safety practices.

⁶⁴ Page, J et al. (2019). An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 233–250.

⁶⁵ Cooke L, Piers-Blundell A. (2019). Embedding evidence-based practice in a remote Indigenous early learning and parenting program: A systematic approach.

⁶⁶ Yunkaporta, T. (2007). Indigenous knowledge systems: Comparing Aboriginal and Western ways of knowing.

- FaFT should assist Aboriginal mothers to cook healthy and native bush foods for their children; should engage parents in decisions on how they want their children to learn; assist families maintain clean and healthy households for children; and celebrate children's developmental milestones and other achievements with families.

4.3.2 FLOs help families navigate the FaFT journey safely

The FaFT program documentation outlines how FaFT is intended to prioritise the recruitment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, particularly in the role of the FLO. The FLO has several key functions:

- Supporting the delivery of the FaFT program, including 3a activities, administrative tasks, and parent capacity building.
- Planning and including cultural activities and place-based Aboriginal child rearing practices in the program. For example, incorporating baby smoking ceremonies into Learning on Country (LOC) activities.
- Conducting community engagement, including through home visits, relationships with families, and partnerships with community organisations.
- Providing an understanding of local community needs and dynamics and communicating this to the FE and the school.

Through these functions, the FLO acts as an interface between the local community and the FaFT program (including the FE and the broader school). This supports cultural safety by creating a supportive and welcoming environment for families; and inform the FE and the school about any community dynamics that may impact the delivery of FaFT (such as 'poison relationships', sorry business, local tensions, and upcoming community cultural events).

The FLO also plays a critical role in ensuring cultural safety by supporting families to provide input into the site-level design and implementation of content and activities. For example, some FLOs invite families to suggest songs or activities to incorporate, including on-country activities such as fishing or hunting. The FLO often holds a relationship of trust with the participating families, which can help create a safe space for the parents to contribute their feedback and suggestions. This consultation with participating families, in addition to consultation with the community through yarning circles outlined in 4.2.3 above, helps ensure that the site-level program content and design is relevant to the local community and reflects their needs and expectations.

4.3.3 FaFT measures development in a culturally safe way

The Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking About Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) was incorporated into FaFT in 2017 as a child developmental screening tool. It provides valuable information to programs on how to best support each child's learning and development. Adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by researchers at the University of Melbourne,⁶⁷ the tool is intended to inform parents about child development, thereby giving them more of an opportunity to engage with the program and its outcomes, and build their confidence as they see signs of progress. Local FaFT staff are trained in how to conduct the screening, which allows screening to be conducted by a trusted member of the local

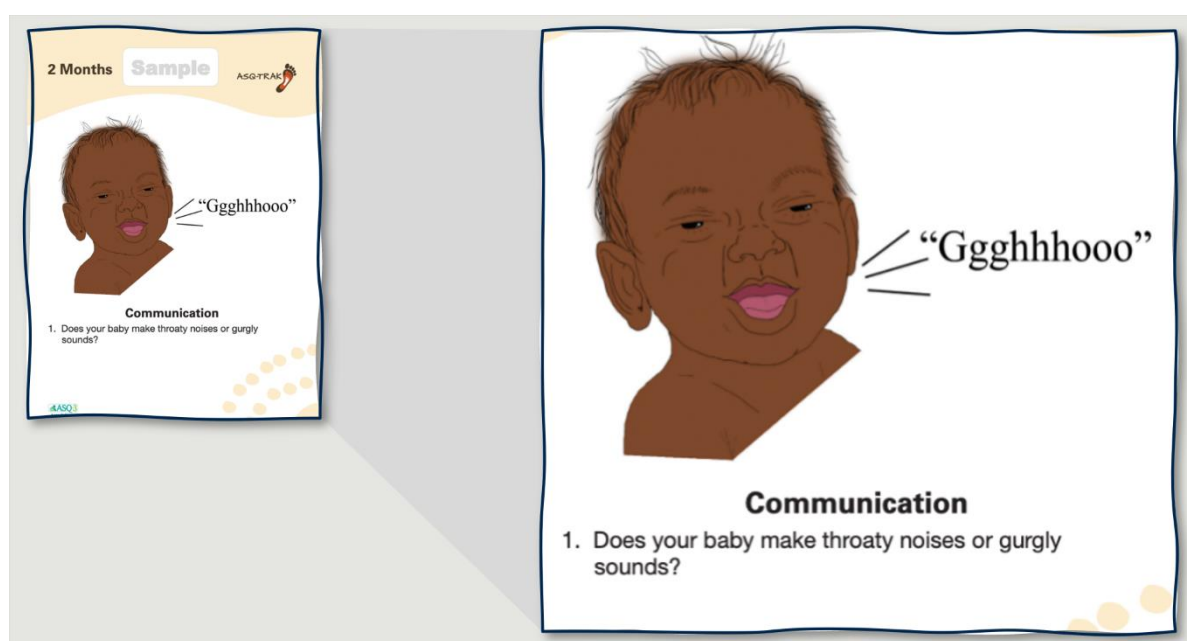
⁶⁷ University of Melbourne (2023). ASQ-TRAK developmental screening tool extended, 2023, <https://medicine.unimelb.edu.au/mms/mms-staff-news/newsletter-issue-27-march-2023/asq-trak-developmental-screening-tool-extended>

community, which in turn enhances conversations between program staff and families about child development.

The ASQ-TRAK is based on the American ASQ-3. It underwent a comprehensive process to ensure it was appropriate for remote Aboriginal communities across the NT, including consultation with Aboriginal communities, interviews with experts, incorporation of illustrations of Aboriginal families and family situations, and translation into both Yolŋu Matha and Arrernte.

The design of ASQ-TRAK covers five major domains of development: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social. Several child health nurses, allied health staff and academic experts engaged by Nous during site visits, observed that the ASQ-TRAK was a useful developmental screening tool which facilitated early intervention of child developmental issues. FaFT Staff, expert stakeholders and service partners generally perceived ASQ-TRAK to be culturally safe, easy to implement in community and useful for processing referrals to other services. Figure 11 below shows an example of a question from the ASQ-TRAK.

Figure 11 | Sample ASQ-TRAK Question



4.3.4 The design of 3a pedagogy enables the use of a child's first language

The FaFT Book states that 3a is a culturally sound pedagogy as its language priority aspect is intended to facilitate the use of first languages throughout all FaFT activities.⁶⁸ The focus on first languages early in life is important for FaFT children as that is the age where young children's identities and learning dispositions are forged.⁶⁹ The Early Years Learning Framework, a requirement under the FaFT guidelines, recognises the importance of identity as children who possess close connection with their local culture tend to have higher self-esteem, improved social confidence and greater expectation of what they can aspire to.⁷⁰ The design of FaFT seeks to promote first languages through the 3a, including by:

- Leveraging the FLO's understanding and capacity to deliver FaFT in the local Aboriginal language.
- Providing books transcribed in Aboriginal languages for conversational reading activities.
- Incorporating songs and musical activities that use Aboriginal languages.
- Sharing informational materials in Aboriginal first language at parent workshops.
- The use of first languages also allows important messages to be conveyed effectively. For example, the nutritional poster to the right in Yolŋu Matha encouraging children to avoid soft drinks.



4.4 Further adaption was required when FaFT expanded to urban centres

The original design of FaFT was centred on the delivery of the program in remote Aboriginal communities. This focus continues. However, in 2018, the scope of FaFT was intentionally expanded to include sites in Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs. These sites were selected according to the degree of vulnerability and disadvantage experienced by local communities. These communities generally have larger and more culturally diverse populations –including Aboriginal families from a range of different backgrounds, as well as non-Aboriginal families – and a greater range of available services (including other ECEC services). While FaFT is inherently flexible and adaptive to local contexts, this move does raise questions about the appropriateness of different aspects of the original model to these sites. For example:

- How valuable and practical it is for urban FaFT sites to undertake community engagement activities?
- What does cultural appropriateness look like when the participating cohorts are from a mix of backgrounds?

The latter question is of particular interest to the evaluation. We understand that several urban FaFT sites have a weaker focus on cultural activities targeted at Aboriginal participants, which would be appropriate. The existing approaches to site-level planning, in line with the Outcomes Framework, allow cultural

⁶⁸ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2020). FaFT Book, 10-17.

⁶⁹ Page, J. (2022). Empowering Aboriginal families as their children's first teachers of cultural knowledge, languages and identity at Galiwin'ku FaFT playgroup.

⁷⁰ Department of Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. (2020). FaFT Book, 22.

appropriateness to be both interpreted in a suitably broad way and implemented in line with the local context (i.e. including where there may be a smaller population of Aboriginal families).

While acknowledging that Aboriginal families are likely to come from a range of different communities, language groups and cultural backgrounds, it does create a risk of there being insufficient attention to providing a culturally safe and relevant environment for them. Nous notes that this risk can be managed through effective program oversight and support, including guidance from the Department's corporate team, and through specific strategies such as targeted outreach and strategic community partnerships.

5 Processes

This section describes provides detailed discussion of:

- key barriers and enablers to implementation success
- fidelity to the core tenets of the program
- specific issues and opportunities related to workforce development, partnerships and governance.

5.1 Implementation of FaFT has been, and will continue to be, a challenge due to site contexts and program ambitions.

The process evaluation of the initial phase of FaFT, completed in 2011, references a range of implementation documentation. As noted earlier, however, FaFT has evolved and expanded since its inception, giving rise to gaps in the records and making it difficult to understand or assess progress against the original goals for its roll-out. The evaluation has nevertheless been able to draw several conclusions, including on key barriers and enablers that have been encountered at the sites we visited.

We note that our findings here complement and build on a range of research, including the aforementioned ARC Linkage study as well as site-specific research.⁷¹ They also are presented with an acknowledgement that the ambitions of FaFT are systemic, long-term and cover a range of outcomes, each of which contain a range of complexities and are interdependencies. It is important to keep this in mind when evaluating both implementation and outcomes.

Moreover, the communities in which FaFT is delivered are diverse and have their own histories, geographies, values, priorities and perspectives, including on what 'success' looks like. It is not surprising, therefore, that there will be varying manifestations of the program and challenges encountered across the sites, including with respect to family engagement and participation.

5.1.1 Site selection involves weighing several factors

The criteria for selecting FaFT sites reportedly included such factors as:

- **Geographic distribution** – the Department was concerned to see an equitable approach to providing FaFT resources across the NT.
- **Community demographics** – locations with a large and growing population of children were to be prioritised.
- **Place-based health needs** – originally FaFT used the Quality Improvement Program Planning System (QIPPS) to inform implementation, by working the Department of Health to gather health records for a potential site. This was expected to not only aid site selection but to tailor the focus of FaFT to local health needs.

⁷¹ For example, Elek, C., Gibberd, A., Gubhaju, L. et al. *An Opportunity for Our Little Ones: Findings from an Evaluation of an Aboriginal Early Childhood Learning Centre in Central Australia*. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 50, 579–591 (2022) and Page, J., Murray, L., Cock, M., Eadie, P., Nossar, V., Niklas, F., Scull, J. & Sparling, J. (2021). *Aboriginal children's health, playgroup participation and early learning outcomes in two remote Northern Territory communities*. *Health Education Journal* 80(5), 596–610.

- **Available housing and infrastructure** – the Department considered the availability of housing for the FE and appropriate facilities for the FaFT program.
- **Community interest** – the level of community interest was gauged through consultations with the IECPRG and prominent families.
- In practice, selection of FaFT sites was also influenced by political priorities and / or commitments made in funding agreements with the Australian Government. Stakeholders we consulted said this had the effect of expediting the expansion of FaFT, broadening access to the program quickly. However, it also carried risks of fidelity and quality being compromised.⁷² In the view of some, hastening implementation led to the establishment of FaFT sites in locations with insufficient demand or community interest, which meant they had an 'uphill' battle to build and maintain a successful presence.

5.1.2 FaFT has achieved broad coverage throughout the NT

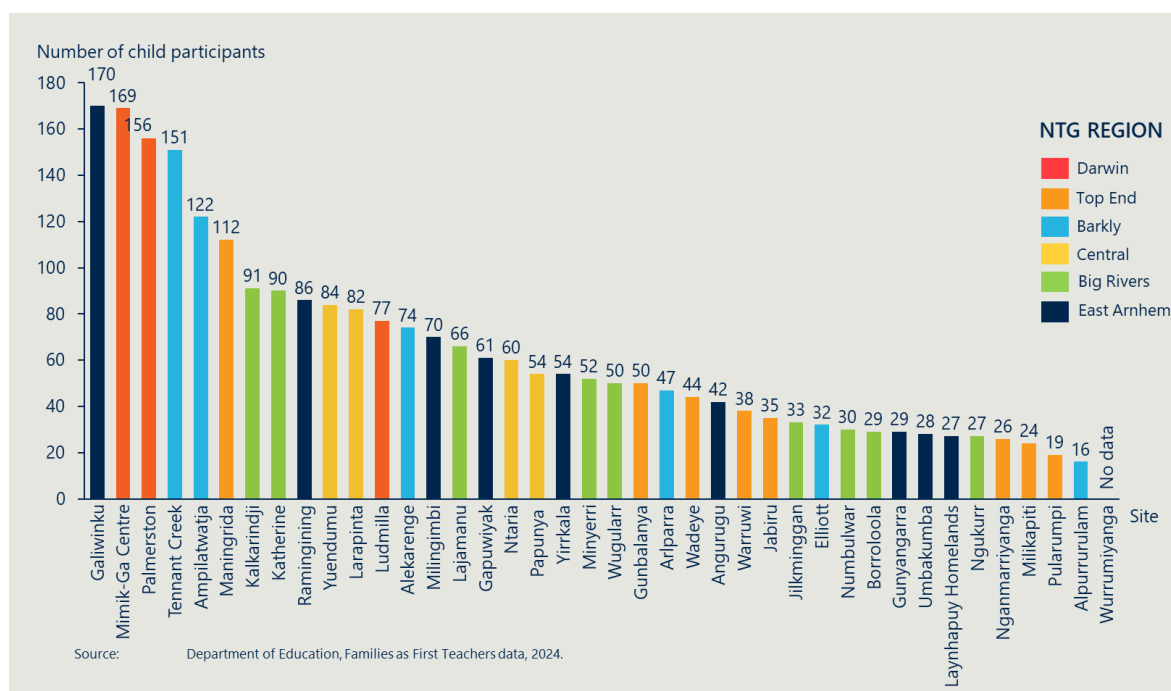
As the FaFT program has expanded over time, so has its geographic coverage across the NT. There are now FaFT sites in each of the six regions, including:

- 6 sites in Barkly
- 8 sites in Big Rivers
- 4 sites in Central
- 3 sites in Darwin
- 12 sites in East Arnhem
- 7 sites in the Top End

Figure 12 overleaf shows the number of children participating at each FaFT site in 2023. FaFT was operational across all 40 sites, noting that Papunya resumed operations in 2023 after a year of being non-operational in 2022 due to staffing challenges.

⁷² Expansion of the program was also driven by the need to meet objectives associated with Commonwealth funding for the IPSS.

Figure 12 | Number of children participating at least once per year, by site, 2023



5.1.3 A range of barriers to, and enablers of, implementation success have been identified

The evaluation surveyed FaFT staff and school principals to identify the top enablers and barriers for the implementation of FaFT. Figure 13 and Figure 14 respectively summarise the responses.

Figure 13 | Most frequently cited enablers in FaFT survey

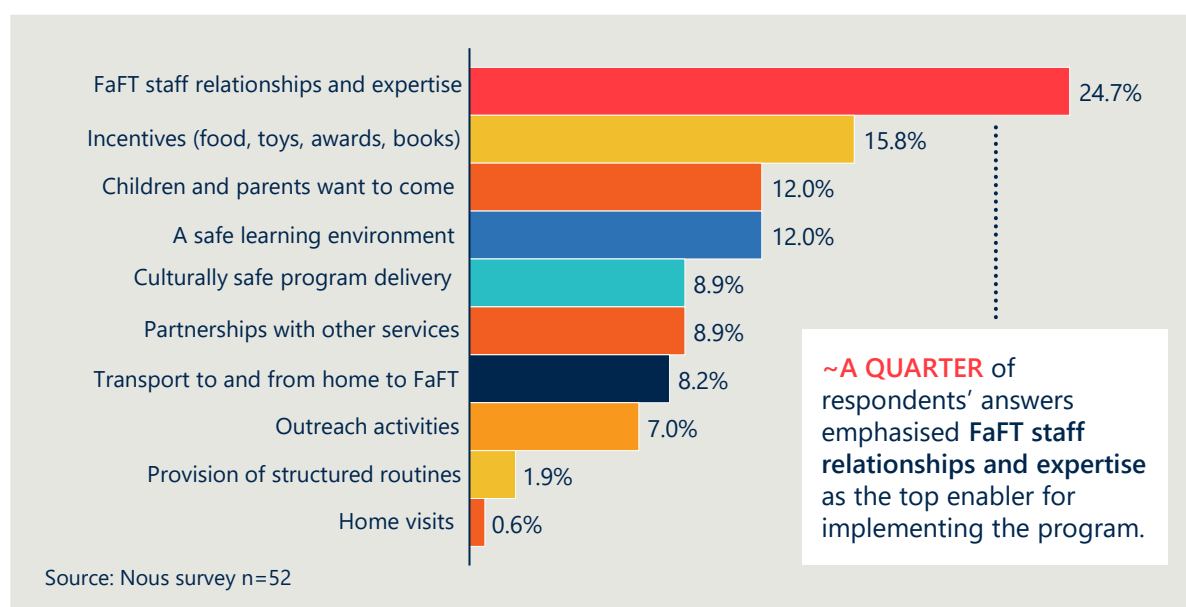
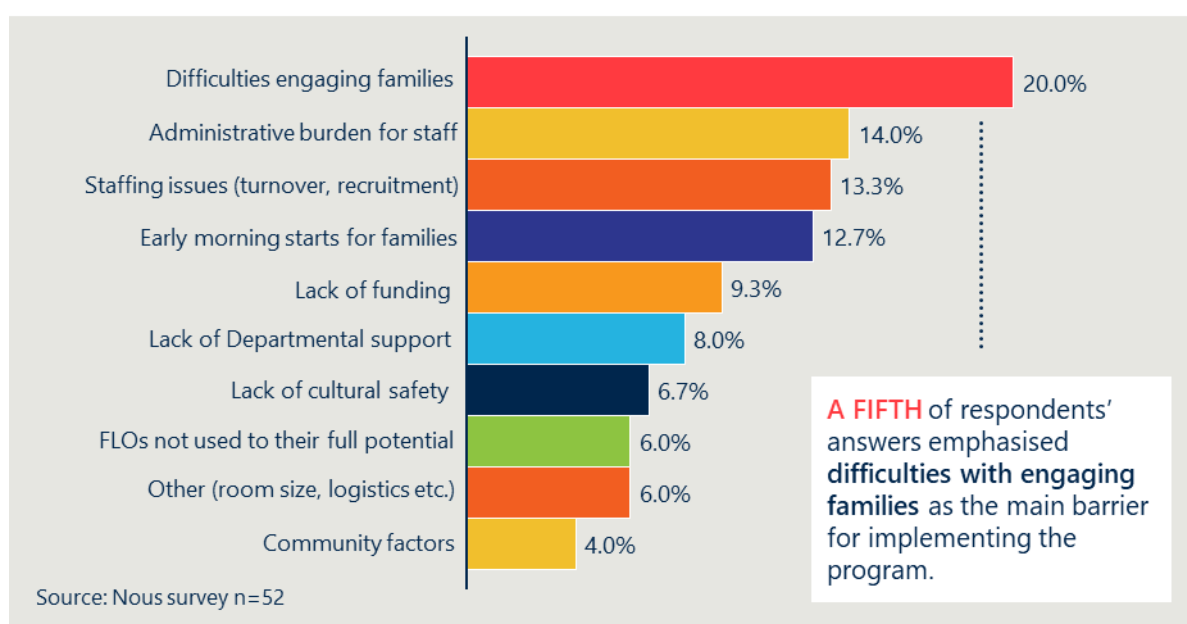


Figure 14 | Most frequently cited barriers according to FaFT staff and school principals



These are explored in more detail in the discussion below.

5.2 Implementation has reflected the core tenets of FaFT

5.2.1 All FaFT sites delivered 3a activities and developed an understanding of how to support successful delivery

- As documented throughout this report and the accompanying literature review, one of the key strengths of 3a is its ability to be successfully implemented in a variety of settings. Nous was able to directly observe 3a strategies being used by both FaFT staff and parents during the evaluation site visits, with the exception of the Ntaria site as there were no families in attendance on the day of the site visit. The FaFT Outcomes Framework Reports document the use of 3a strategies throughout all sites visited.

Stakeholders reported that the following specific features contributed to the successful delivery of 3a activities:

- Visual representations** - where core elements of 3a activities were represented on posters and other visuals throughout the FaFT room, this helped promote families' understanding of the process.
- Clear guidance from staff** – where FaFT staff can clearly and confidently explain and guide 3a activities, families are more likely to understand.
- Simplicity of the activities** – many families said that the activities were easy to replicate in a home environment.
- Structure of the activities** – many families and staff valued that the clear timing and guidance around activities, which helped make them more effective and also helped children become more familiar with routine to help support their transition to preschool.

"We use the learning games at home; like when we go shopping, we count things, list the colours, name things and describe what they are used for."

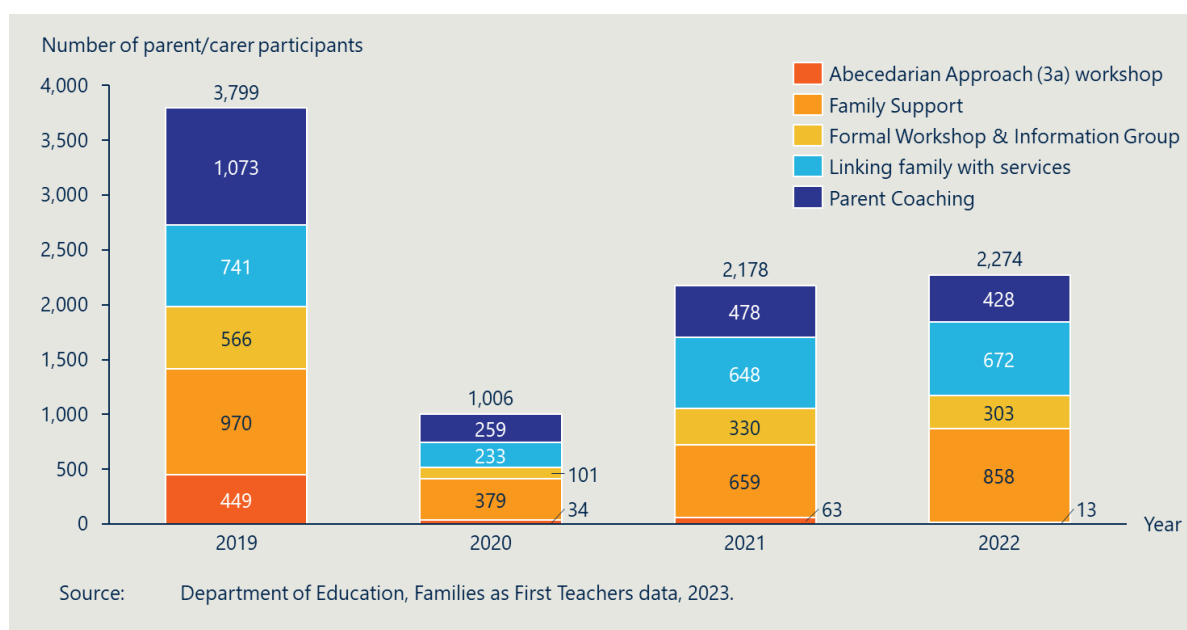
– FaFT parent in urban location

Where FaFT sites faced challenges in delivering 3a activities, this was largely due to irregular attendance and participation. This created challenges for staff in planning and conducting their activities and reduces the exposure of the children and parents to the 3a strategies. This again highlights the importance of community engagement in the FaFT model, including to support families finding it difficult to attend the program regularly due to external challenges such as poverty, health conditions, overcrowded housing and family conflict.

5.2.2 All FaFT sites have incorporated aspects of parental capacity and confidence building

All FaFT sites visited showed a clear commitment to incorporating parent confidence and capacity building activities in the program. The weekly plans and the FaFT Outcomes reports reviewed as part of the evaluation demonstrated the integration of lessons on nutrition, health, hygiene and child development into the FaFT program. For example, some sites had collaborated with the local clinic to identify the health needs of the community and had tailored workshops based on those needs. Figure 15 summarises data on parent capacity and confidence activities undertaken at FaFT in the period 2019-2022.

Figure 15 | Parent capacity and confidence building activities undertaken at FaFT from 2019-2022



All FaFT sites provided accessible material designed to help inform parents on beneficial nutritional choices and how to prevent and treat health issues on community. See Figure 16 for a posters on family nutrition and the 'Skin Story' which describes the prevention and treatment of skin conditions commonly found in remote communities.

Evidence of parental confidence activities was present in stakeholder consultations with FaFT staff. Family educators frequently described how attendance ceremonies celebrating FaFT mothers aimed to boost mothers' confidence and recognise their hard work. Most FLOs remarked how a key aspect of their role was reassuring parents and making them feel more comfortable in the FaFT space, particularly for families who were new to the space.

Figure 16 | Posters describing healthy nutrition and a page from the 'Skin Story' describing how to get rid of scabies



Despite the examples of successful parent capacity building activities, some stakeholders saw persistent challenges in implementing parental education workshops. These included:

- **Program fidelity issues for nutritional workshops** – several stakeholders noted missed opportunities to incorporate nutritional workshops into daily FaFT food preparation activities, specifically citing instances where program or other school staff consistently prepared morning tea and lunch without any parental involvement.
- **Declining emphasis on health literacy and individual parent support at FaFT** – consultations with school principals, former FaFT corporate staff and service partners revealed a perception that felt the program's emphasis on health literacy and parental support had gradually receded. They saw two key reasons for this:
 1. Change in qualification requirements for FEs – Some service partners and former FaFT corporate staff advocated for a return to the previous FE hiring model where candidates with a health background could apply. Making the role exclusive to candidates with an education background meant there were missed opportunities to strengthen the focus on health literacy in parental education workshops.
 2. Workshop scheduling – Some school principals said that health-related parental capacity workshops were conducted on an impromptu basis. This partially reflected community rhythms, but the consequence was that many parents missed out. To mitigate this, they suggested a continuous focus on a specific health literacy theme throughout a semester. This would reinforce learnings and ensure a wider exposure by families.

5.2.3 Community engagement helps FaFT adapt to local needs, but requires ongoing focus and support

The nature, extent and effectiveness of community engagement varied by location, depending on place-based needs and the strength of FaFT relationships on the ground. Community service providers and program staff agreed that there was no single best way of increasing engagement with community – it depended on the needs of the community. For example, FaFT educators indicated that respectful engagement required an understanding of when it is appropriate to visit a home, particularly as home visits could sometimes be considered invasive. Others pointed out that differing family and parental structures in communities required FaFT to be adaptive. Feedback from parents participating in program indicated they generally found the community engagement activities to be appropriate.

Outreach increases program visibility and enables engagement with more families

Effective community engagement includes outreach activities, such as home visits and running FaFT programs in community (e.g. FaFT at football games).

FaFT staff members and principals said outreach activities helped them reach vulnerable families in community who did not feel comfortable in a school environment. Some school principals and service providers identified that outreach activities helped promote the program by increasing its visibility.

Parents and FaFT staff alike recommended ongoing use of outreach strategies, particularly given some FaFT rooms were too small to accommodate a large number of families. Parents also requested more mobile services, similar to those provided by FaFT in the past.

“Outreach is really important, you know, it's not the biggest building, so when they go out and do outreach, they get quite large numbers. The more they're out the more people they engage with” – School principal

Community engagement is strengthened by experience, understanding and trust

Community engagement was effectively implemented where FaFT staff – particularly FEs – had a strong understanding of and relationship with the community. This was most evident where staff had spent significant time in the location. There appeared to be a clear correlation between high levels of community trust in FaFT as providing a safe, welcoming space, and levels of family engagement.

In some cases, FEs did not conduct extensive community engagement activities and relied largely on the FLOs to coordinate this. Staff suggested this could be addressed through additional support (including from the FaFT corporate team) for new FEs who are not familiar with the community or may not be confident in community engagement activities. Several stakeholders also suggested that building trust would be enabled through better collaboration with key community leaders and Elders.

*“They come here, and this is their safe place. They can come here without judgement, and they can learn.”
– FaFT service provider*

Community engagement helped identify barriers to participation

Strong and sustained community engagement allowed program sites to identify and respond to issues affecting family participation in FaFT. Key examples of such issues were:

- community cultural commitments (such as sorry business)
- family movement between communities
- past traumatic experiences in the community and/or in experience with government institutions

- conflicts with other children and/or parents attending FaFT, and concerns about bad behaviour of other children in the program
- 'poison relationships' with other families attending FaFT, meaning that according to cultural protocols certain family members are not allowed to be in the same place at the same time
- lack of access to transport to access the program
- jealousy and controlling behaviour by husbands and partners, preventing mothers from attending
- challenges with food security, overcrowded housing, family and domestic violence, community unrest and issues with drugs, alcohol and/or gambling
- early morning starts not reflecting community lifestyles in some locations where the community is generally more active in the evening.

In some instances, program sites were able to respond directly to these barriers. For example, where food security was identified as a significant barrier, FaFT sites prioritised operational funds to supply families with food, which supported greater participation while addressing a significant health challenge. Some program staff emphasised, in particular, the value of attendance awards and graduation ceremonies in providing recognition for children and families for their hard work and worked collaboratively with the parents to design the related activities.

"You've got food available that makes you want to come, you can have breakfast, you can have lunch, that makes things easy." – FaFT parent in remote location

"I find that the different toys and activities work well...she can go on the bike, in the sandpit and paint. We don't have any of that stuff at home." – FaFT parent in remote location

Not all issues surfaced through community engagement were amenable to quick resolution. For example, due to the operation of FaFT within school grounds and on the school schedule, sites were unable to adjust the program's operating hours to hold sessions in the afternoons or evenings. Some parents suggested delivering FaFT in the afternoon to make it easier for participants to attend. However, FaFT staff and principals countered that an advantage of the early start was that it helped establish a routine for subsequent preschool attendance.

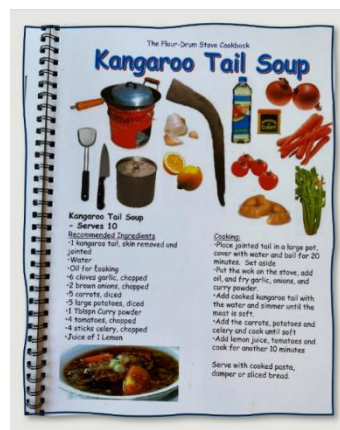
"The parents probably stay up all night and they're not ready. Or they sleep in. It would it be good to have FaFT in the afternoon in that case, so people can sleep in?" – FaFT parents from a remote community

5.2.4 FaFT sites successfully incorporated cultural activities and facilitated use of first language

All FaFT staff, and FLOs in particular, affirmed that place-based cultural activities were successfully incorporated into the program delivery. Overall, FLOs were in unanimous view that FaFT's cultural activities made the program more culturally relevant and safe for families. They advised that they had helped organise and implement the following cultural activities:

- **Preparing traditional Aboriginal food and 'bush tucker'** – many FLOs noted that this was an important cultural activity that worked well with parent capacity building lessons related to promoting nutrition. FaFT staff and parents mentioned preparing damper and meals using locally available fruit and meat. Figure 17 shows an example of a local recipe from a book used in a FaFT site in the Top End. Parents unanimously referenced preparing traditional food as one of their favourite program activities.
- **Excursions and 'Learning on Country'** – these included developmentally-appropriate activities that were designed to strengthen children's connection with their local Country. Younger FaFT mothers and their babies participated in smoking ceremonies, and other children were introduced to important stories and connections to the land. FaFT parents were consistently positive about these trips, and some reported learning practical bush knowledge such as traditional bush medicines. Challenges cited by the FLOs included issues related to transport, community safety and the administrative burden of paperwork required for excursions.
- **Learning about local customs and practices** – FaFT helps children develop a foundational knowledge of their local kinship systems. Some FLOs reported assisting children to identify their family and clan totems, clan colours as well as learning their skin names. These activities were a prominent feature in remote sites that were well staffed with a FLO; however they were not present in urban FaFT sites we visited, which have different demographic profiles.

Figure 17 | Local recipe



"We have damper nights where all the parents meet up and eat. We have all the oldies that come, all the kids sit down, it's lovely." – FaFT parent in remote location

All FaFT sites facilitated use of first language

Under the 3a methodology, sessions do not have to be delivered in first language, because the learning strategies centre on 1-1 interactions with both language and gesture as the vehicles for communication. The FaFT program is often therefore delivered in English in the first instance, with the expectation that families then interact with their children in first language, both during FaFT sessions and outside of FaFT. This means, for example, that not all books need to be available in community languages as the goal is not necessarily to read it, but to talk about what the images might indicate or what the story might be. FLOs and parents are able to support each other in this (noting that the FE is usually non-Aboriginal and typically not fluent in the local language).

That said, some communities were more accustomed to using Aboriginal English as a first language. In several other sites, it was possible for the FaFT program to deliver some 3a activities in first language in the first instance. This was largely dependent on having a confident and experienced FLO and a consistent language base, (some FaFT sites have families from a wide range of language groups). The ability to incorporate first language into FaFT was aided by access to suitable materials that had been translated into local languages with support from the school, the Department and the Indigenous Literacy Fund (ILF). At some sites, FLOs had also translated key 3a strategies and artefacts into local languages.

It also helps for there to be a local language centre, or else a strong partnership with community Elders in community who speak the local language. Again, the FLOs play a crucial role. Some FLOs reported that they were from a different community and so could not speak the local language, or that they were proficient in some but not all languages used locally. They nevertheless sought to incorporate cultural activities into their work, including through their connection to families and community cultural leaders.

Some stakeholders called for more cultural learning, activities in language, and co-design

FaFT staff and service providers perceived a tension between tailoring the program to Aboriginal child-rearing practices and getting children ready for participation in a Western education system. They suggested there should be more cultural learning and an improved focus on first languages in the program. Some parents regretted that there were not enough books in language and that activities were generally conducted in English.

By the same token, FaFT staff and community service providers noted the challenges of running FaFT activities in first languages (e.g. when there are numerous local languages spoken). Some FEs said this issue was exacerbated by absences of FLOs, or the engagement of FLOs on casual contracts that do not allow sufficient time to run enough activities in first language. Yet we also heard of sites at which the FLO was under-utilised. The strength of first languages use in a FaFT program is largely contingent on the degree to which the FLO is equipped and empowered in their role.

5.3 Workforce development, partnerships and good governance are all critical to successful implementation

5.3.1 Opportunities for staff and career development are welcome, and there is appetite for more

FLOs and FEs agreed that the 3a practitioner training was effective and useful; however, several staff felt they needed a 'refresher', and there were instances of some FLOs had not completed the training. Program staff also cited a lack of training in certain areas as an issue. For example, some FaFT staff in Central Australia said that they lacked sufficient understanding of community kinship systems and other important community dynamics. Others saw a specific need for further training on the 3a, and for more support to implement the pedagogy successfully. FaFT sites in Central Australia were having a greater difficulty than others in coaching families to apply the 3a techniques.

Stakeholders reported that staffing shortages and turnover had the potential to negatively impact FaFT – for example, by compromising quality, capacity and/or coverage. This related in part to the annual funding cycles, as FEs and FLOs are typically employed on fixed one-year contracts, which affects attraction and retention. Further, it can be difficult to secure long-term housing for FEs in some communities, creating an additional challenge in recruitment.

"The 3a training was extremely valuable. It's a lot of effort, but it's really motivating me to implement things into our own site." – FaFT Staff member

On a positive note, certain remote FaFT sites based at schools said that making training opportunities available had attracted older Aboriginal high school students into the FLO role. This had the dual benefit of providing these students with work experience opportunities while also contributing to recruitment of Aboriginal staff for the

program. FaFT staff members suggested that this potential be recognised through a more systemic approach to encouraging the participation of Aboriginal students.

5.3.2 Support from the Department and school leaders has been key

Corporate support from the Department and effective program governance were seen as the factors driving consistency in core program delivery across FaFT sites. Most program staff were positive about the support they received both from the FaFT corporate team and from school principals. They considered the

role of corporate staff to be crucial to successful implementation – for example, by helping new FEs get in touch with local community contacts and providing ad hoc assistance in troubleshooting.

A range of stakeholders – including departmental staff, FaFT staff and school principals – raised concerns about resourcing, arguing that the expansion of FaFT to additional sites had increased the amount of corporate support required. This pressure has been compounded by the loss of two program leader positions in the 2021-22 departmental restructure. This has reportedly led to fewer site visits by corporate staff. Program staff and school principals alike called for a stronger regional presence, pointing to the risk that under-resourcing of corporate support will diminish implementation quality over time.

Leadership by principals was also seen by FaFT and corporate staff as key to promoting and valuing early learning, and to ensuring that FaFT Term reports reported appropriately against the FaFT Outcomes Framework.

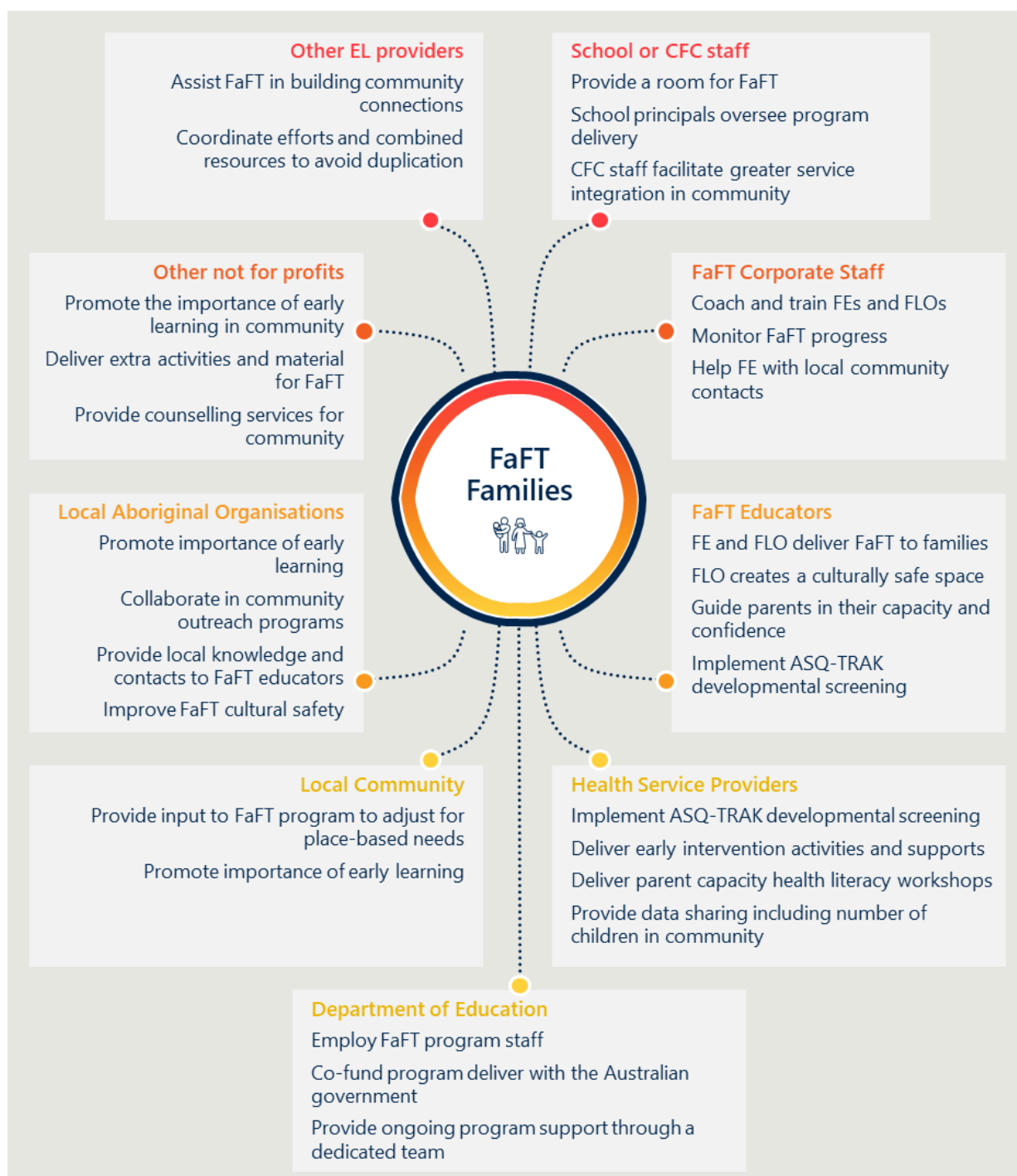
Several stakeholders (including one school principal) said that principal engagement with FaFT was uneven, however. A specific issue raised in this regard were that some principals were not fully appreciative of the value of early learning (e.g. when they sought to assign roles to FEs that were out of scope or inappropriate to their ST1 work level). These stakeholders nevertheless said that principal engagement had, on the whole, improved over time.

“Principals have to deal with the everyday management of the school. As a result, FaFT can slip down as a priority.” – Expert stakeholder

5.3.3 FaFT sites have forged partnerships with a range of organisations

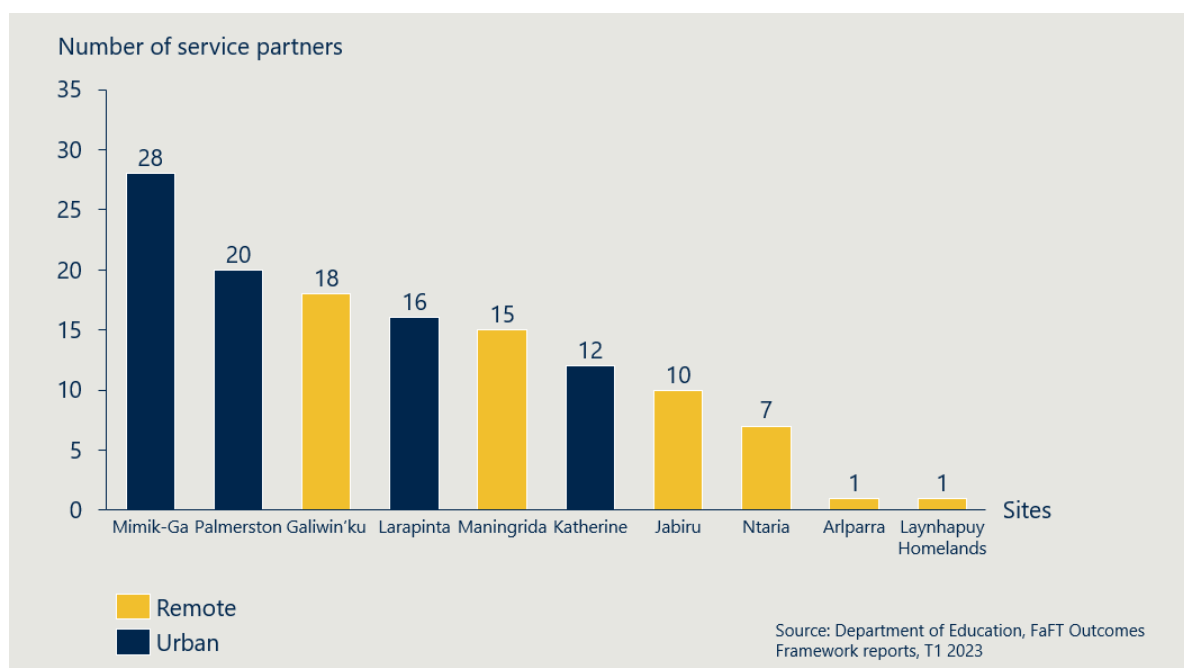
Successful delivery of FaFT relies on a strong network of formal and informal connections among departmental, school-based and community stakeholders, and it something that program staff need to monitor as part of the FaFT Outcomes Framework reporting process (discussed further below). Specifically, they are required to record the number of organisations, businesses, agencies and services that a FaFT site has actively worked with during each term. Figure 18 indicates the range of organisations within each FaFT’s ‘ecosystem’ with which program staff need to engage.

Figure 18 | Organisations that contribute to FaFT implementation



This engagement translates to a network of service partnerships. As an indication of the extent of these arrangements, Figure 19 provides data on the number of service partnerships at each site visited during the evaluation. This is based on Term 1 2023 FaFT Outcomes Framework reports. Service partnerships are also discussed in the site-level case studies in Appendix A.

Figure 19 | Number of service partners per FaFT site (remote and urban) as at Term 1, 2023⁷³



The data shows that urban sites have a higher number of partnerships, which is unsurprising given the higher concentration of services in densely populated areas. It also points to the logistical constraints that more remote program sites must overcome to forge such partnerships. For example, as noted in the Laynhapuy Homelands case study (see Appendix A), some of areas are so remote that Miwatj and Anglicare do not operate there due to the high costs.

Of note is that program staff commented that the presence of Connected Beginnings (CB) and/or the siting of FaFT within a Child and Family Centre (CFC) both contributed to the development of stronger relationships with local service partners.

5.3.4 Monitoring and reporting could be improved to relieve burden and deliver more value

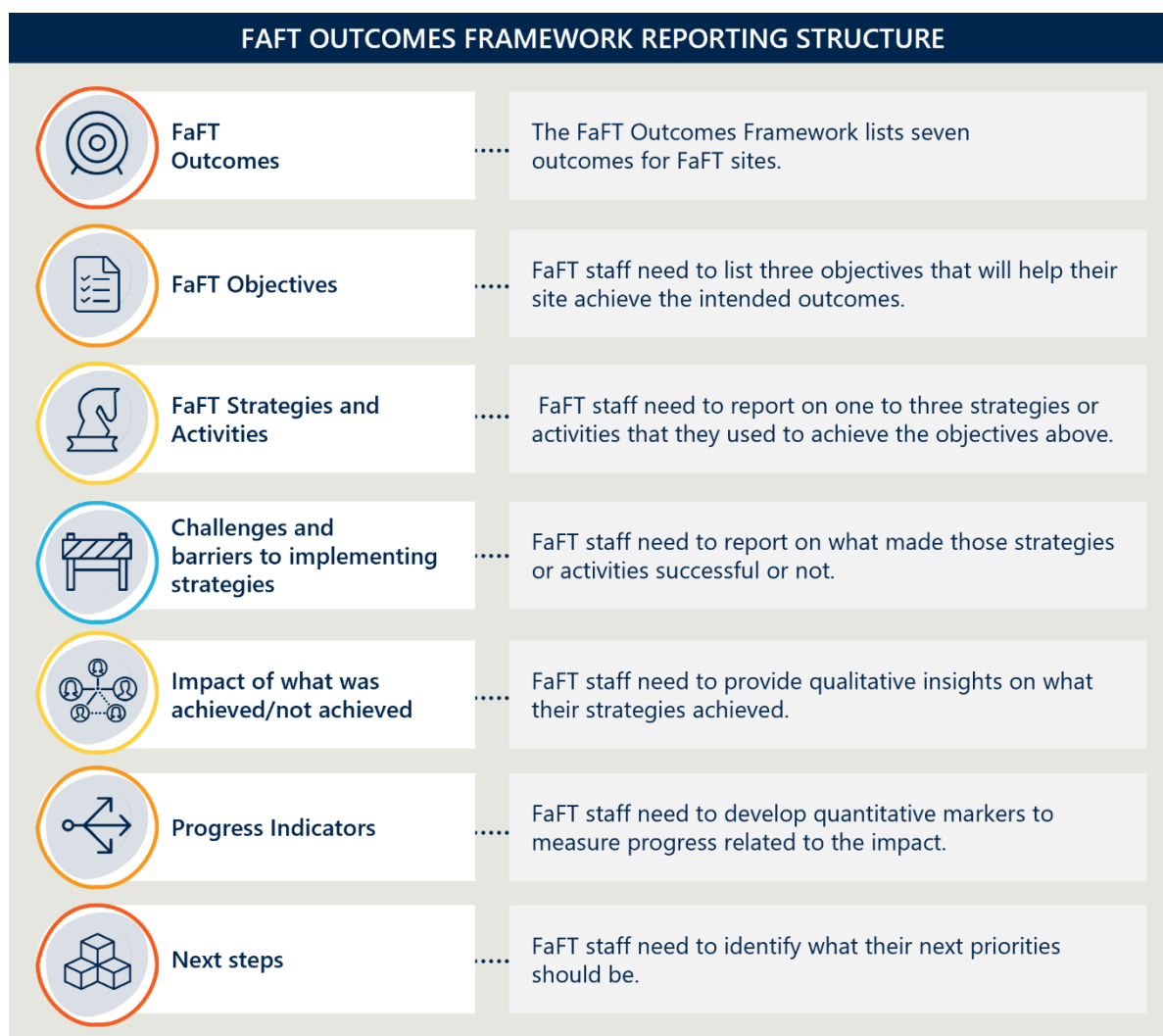
An important element of good governance is having effective monitoring and reporting systems in place. Significant attention has been given to this throughout FaFT's implementation, and the following data collection systems were put in place:

- **The Student Administration System (SAMS)** – FaFT staff capture enrolment data on this system. School principals are responsible for ensuring that all FaFT children are enrolled in SAMS upon commencing FaFT.
- **The Early Childhood Program Attendance System (ECPAS)** – FaFT staff use this system to capture data participation and engagement, program activities including 3a (e.g., number of learning games or back-and forth interactions), parent capacity building sessions, and ASQ-TRAK developmental screening results. The FaFT corporate team trains new FEs in how to use ECPAS and provides assistance when required. Principals are responsible for ensuring timely and accurate data entry.

⁷³ The figures for Gunbalanya and Yirrkala are not included as their Outcomes Framework reports were not received; however, Nous confirmed during the site visits that these sites did interact with service partners.

Reports provided by sites against the FaFT Outcomes Framework are a central component of the reporting system. They are prepared each term and provide an overview of how each site is performing with respect to each of the seven FaFT outcomes (listed in section 3.5). These reports are monitored and analysed by the FaFT corporate team to support the continuous quality improvement feedback process, as well as being used to inform future FaFT strategies. Figure 20 below provides greater detail on the reporting structure and requirements.

Figure 20 | The structure of FaFT Outcomes Framework Reports



Experts consulted, as well as departmental staff, saw FaFT's monitoring and reporting of program performance as a strength. However, while there is comprehensive data available relating to program outputs, the reporting of FaFT's impact on families relies on qualitative, arguably more subjective, measures. The 2011 Menzies Process Evaluation indicated that improvements to this aspect of data collection would enable:

- more effective program management and accountability
- monitoring and evaluation across all sites
- consideration of 'place based' outcomes
- analysis of service reach, program costs and effects, outcome trends, and program impacts

- building of an evidence base that the program was *'helping families helping children'*.

These recommendations were largely addressed through the implementation of the Outcomes Framework and associated reporting. In particular, the roll-out of the ECPAS system in 2015, which captures average parent and child attendance, strengthened monitoring across all sites. ECPAS also records activities such as community outreach and home visits, which has helped track service reach.

While these improvements are significant, they focus primarily on outputs rather than outcomes. Overall, there is limited data to enable assessment of program outcomes for children and families or the broader community. For example, there is no tracking of children's transition to preschool or measurement of parents' development through capacity building workshops.

In addition, FaFT corporate staff said that accessing and analysing much of the data in ECPAS was time-consuming and difficult; consequently, it was not being used to its full potential. Many FaFT educators across urban and remote sites emphasised the difficulty of accurately recording how many back-and-forth interactions took place between parents and their children and felt that ECPAS was not user-friendly. They also noted that term reports were inaccessible to FLO staff due to their complexity and language, presenting a challenge for FLOs to both complete the reports and to use them as a data source to drive improvement. At the same time, there was some apparent misunderstanding about the purpose of the data collection, with many stakeholders commenting that they thought it was being used primarily to acquit funding rather than to inform program improvements.

Some community service providers and FaFT staff had, in the past, proposed more qualitative measures to report on and review 3a's implementation. For example, Professor Joseph Sparling and Dr Jane Page's research team applied a qualitative observational method while researching Abecedarian dosage and its link to improved outcomes in two remote NT communities.⁷⁴ In this method, staff were trained to identify emotional and facial cues to measure parent-child engagement, communication and parents' use of joint communication and joint attention. While this approach was deemed successful for a research project, such a data collection method was, understandably, considered as too difficult to consistently implement program wide.

"I think one of the things I've really noticed about the FaFT program is the reporting requirements...the term reports are quite clunky and I'm not sure what purpose they serve."— School principal

"Do you estimate back and forth interactions?"
I'm not standing there with my clipboard documenting how many times, especially when there's ten people in the room, it's impossible."— Family educator

5.3.5 ASQ-TRAK data collection varies across FaFT sites

ASQ-TRAK developmental screening has been introduced at most sites, through the provision of training in how to conduct the screening and how to work with families, as well as support for staff in how to implement the screening generally. In addition, FaFT urban sites can access ASQ 3 developmental screening more readily through the local child health clinics (NT Health).

⁷⁴ Page, J et al. (2019). An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 233–250.

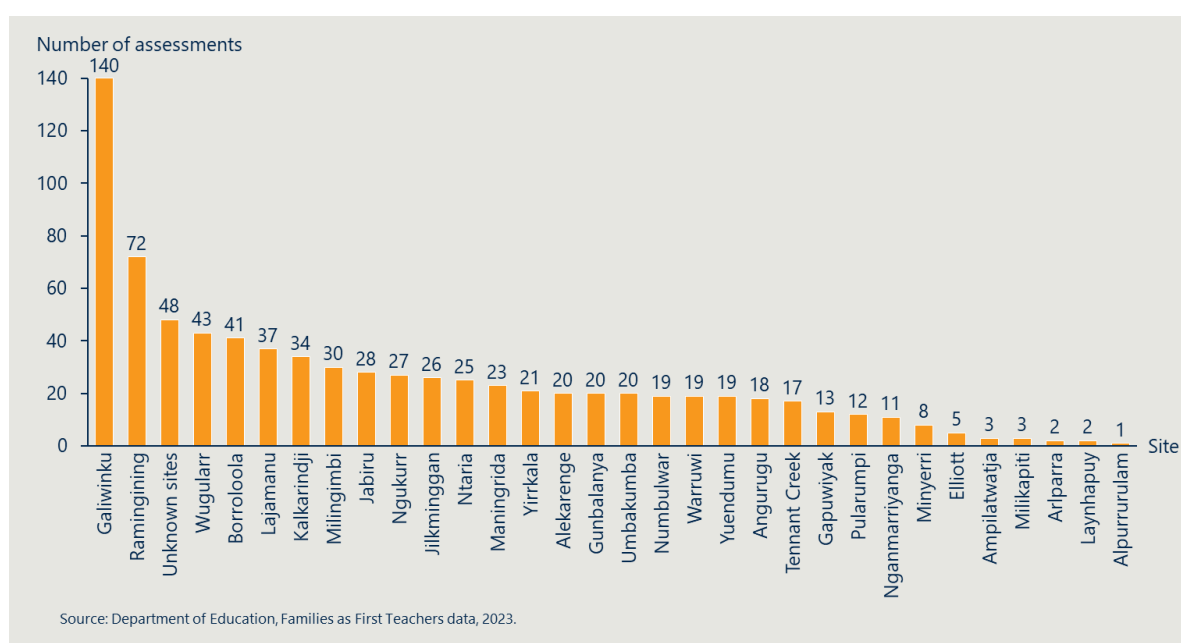
The data on the number of ASQ-TRAK screening questionnaires completed across all sites shows that uptake and implementation of the tool varies significantly. Program staff explained that the variation in the number of completed ASQ-TRAK developmental screening questionnaires has likely been influenced by:

- the number of children in the community and participating in FaFT
- the number of educators and child health nurses who are trained in ASQ-TRAK developmental screening
- the mobility of participants (and hence availability for repeated screening questionnaires).

There also appears to be limited coordination between schools and the Department of Health in the undertaking and recording of ASQ-TRAK screening. This suggests opportunities for greater information sharing to reduce the risk of duplication of activities and avoid unnecessary expense and imposition on participating families.

Figure 21 below illustrates the considerable variation among FaFT sites in terms of the number of ASQ-TRAK developmental screening questionnaires conducted in the period 2019-22.

Figure 21 | Number of ASQ-TRAK screening questionnaires completed, by site, 2019-22⁷⁵



⁷⁵ The figures for Papunya, Gunyangarra, Wadeye, Nguiu, Mimik-Ga, Ludmilla, Palmerston, Katherine and Larapinta have not been included. Papunya was not active in the reporting period. Urban FaFT sites (Mimik-Ga, Ludmilla, Palmerston, Katherine and Larapinta) are not required to undertake ASQ-TRAK screenings. Wadeye and Gunyangarra undertook ASQ-TRAK screenings, however they were recorded on e-Dash, a separate internal school-based data system. 48 ASQ-TRAK screening questionnaires were recorded as having been completed through FaFT but were not attributed to any particular FaFT site – these have been recorded in the chart as 'unknown sites'.

6 Outcomes

Nous assessed the achievement of the intended outcomes of the program by reference to the short-term and long-term outcomes identified in the FaFT program logic (see Figure 4). In so doing we drew on:

- available quantitative and qualitative data
- the substantial evidence base for the Abecedarian model, as distilled in the accompanying literature review, which provides a degree of predictability about likely longer-term outcomes from FaFT.

6.1 The intended short-term outcomes were mostly achieved

The evidence considered through the course of the evaluation suggests that FaFT has:

- Increased availability of culturally appropriate early learning and parenting support programs in communities and provided children with high-quality early learning experiences.
- Strengthened collaboration between partner agencies, noting room for improvement in this respect.
- Enabled Aboriginal staff to improve their skills and knowledge, though to a lesser extent more recently.
- Engaged parents and carers as partners in their children's learning and development.

The program has also delivered outcomes in unanticipated ways. This and the other points above are elaborated upon below.

6.1.1 FaFT has provided access to high-quality and culturally appropriate early learning experiences and parenting support

The evaluation confirms that FaFT has been delivering high-quality place-based culturally appropriate programs, supporting children in their early learning and development and helping parents to build their confidence and capacity.

It has done so in communities that, in the past, had no similar service offerings. The 2011 Menzies Process Evaluation found that "in many communities FaFT-IPSS [as FaFT was then called] ... provides a local resource for families where a formal service was not available previously."⁷⁶ This still appears to be the case in most FaFT sites, with several reporting that many of the children participating had not attended any kind of ECEC service beforehand.

FaFT has therefore filled a significant gap in culturally appropriate early learning and parenting support programs in communities. In so doing, it has assisted Aboriginal children onto a learning pathway, likely contributing to their own and the education system's objectives.

I came in when there was no FAFT and there was quite clearly a hole. I said to the mums, 'What did you do when I wasn't here?' They said 'we didn't do anything, we stayed at home, we got bored.'" — Family Educator

⁷⁶ Menzies School of Health Research. (2011). Families as First Teachers – Indigenous Parenting Support Services Process Evaluation.

It should be noted that developments in the broader ECEC service system have opened more opportunities for early learning – through access to preschools and, in some cases, funded day care and programs like Baby-FAST, which is run by Families and Schools Together (FAST) NT. In urban centres, of course, there are a range of different ECEC services available. However, FaFT remains a distinctive offering, with its focus on family engagement and provision of culturally appropriate supports for children from babyhood.

On this point, many service providers and parents saw the value of FaFT stemming mainly from the clear learning intent of structured activities. This was seen to be distinctive from playgroup sessions, for example, where learning can occur incidentally rather than intentionally. Parents generally felt that the FaFT activities and learning strategies were effective for their children, and helped deliver improvement in language skills, social skills, comprehension, and confidence. (Such long-term outcomes are discussed further in 6.3.)

I like the circle time, like doing the songs and stuff like that. I never did that with him at home. We don't watch Play School or any TV, stuff like that. Learning the songs, then I do that at home with him and he loves it.' – FaFT parent from remote community

The benefits of FaFT extend beyond early learning. As discussed throughout this report, a distinguishing feature of FaFT compared to most other ECEC services (with the exception of FAST) is the focus on parent support and engagement. Unlike other services, parents are required to attend and participate in the sessions with their children and are closely involved in activity design.

6.1.2 FaFT has fostered collaboration among partner agencies

Stakeholders generally saw a strength of FaFT being its ability to integrate with other services and initiatives, both formally and informally, at both a strategic, whole of program level and at an individual site or community level. The program is seen as a valuable channel through which external providers can meaningfully and trustfully engage with parents. FaFT services have successfully partnered with a range of organisations, including the following:

Program level

- Strong Kids Strong Future, who coordinate ASQ-TRAK.
- University of Melbourne, who conducted extensive research on 3a and FaFT, and provided training and guidance to the Department.

Community level

- Child nurses, such as through Australian Nursing Family Partnership Program.
- Health services, such as Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation and other local clinics.
- Allied health services, such as speech pathologists and nutritionists.
- Legal services, such as NT Legal Aid Commission.
- Financial counselling services.

Collaborations arise through four main channels:

- **FaFT Educators** – the FE and the FLO are the most important drivers for collaboration with partner agencies and service providers, though the extent of collaboration varies depending on the FE's understanding of the needs of their site's cohort, the extent of their efforts to establish networks, as well as the range of services that may be available for partnership.

- **School** – where a school has strong leadership and an established approach to engagement and partnerships, the school may encourage FaFT to partner with a particular agency or service provider.
- **Service-providers and agencies** – service providers and agencies sometimes engage directly with a FaFT program after identifying an opportunity to collaborate.
- **Department** – formal partnerships such as the implementation of 3a and ASQ-TRAK are typically initiated and rolled out by the Department.

These partnerships (e.g. with Child Health Nurses) have served to broaden the reach and impact of FaFT. Many are grounded in individual relationships, which can be helpful in ensuring effective mobilisation of resources and pragmatic solutions to problems. One downside of this, however, is the key-person risk that can arise, particularly in the NT context, where the workforce is more likely to be transient. This suggests extra effort should be made to fully embed partnerships where this risk is present, so that can be sustained over time.

6.1.3 FaFT provides quality training, skills development and employment opportunities for Aboriginal staff

Stakeholders shared that in the past, professional development was offered to Aboriginal staff in the FaFT program, including FLOs and playgroup leaders, under the Aboriginal Workforce Development Strategy. In 2010 and 2011, 31 FLOs were enrolled in Certificate III in Community Services Work, and 20 FLOs completed the Indigenous Parent Factor training with early childhood representatives, aligned with the Certificate III in Education Support. This latter training then accredited the participants to deliver the course to parents in their respective communities.

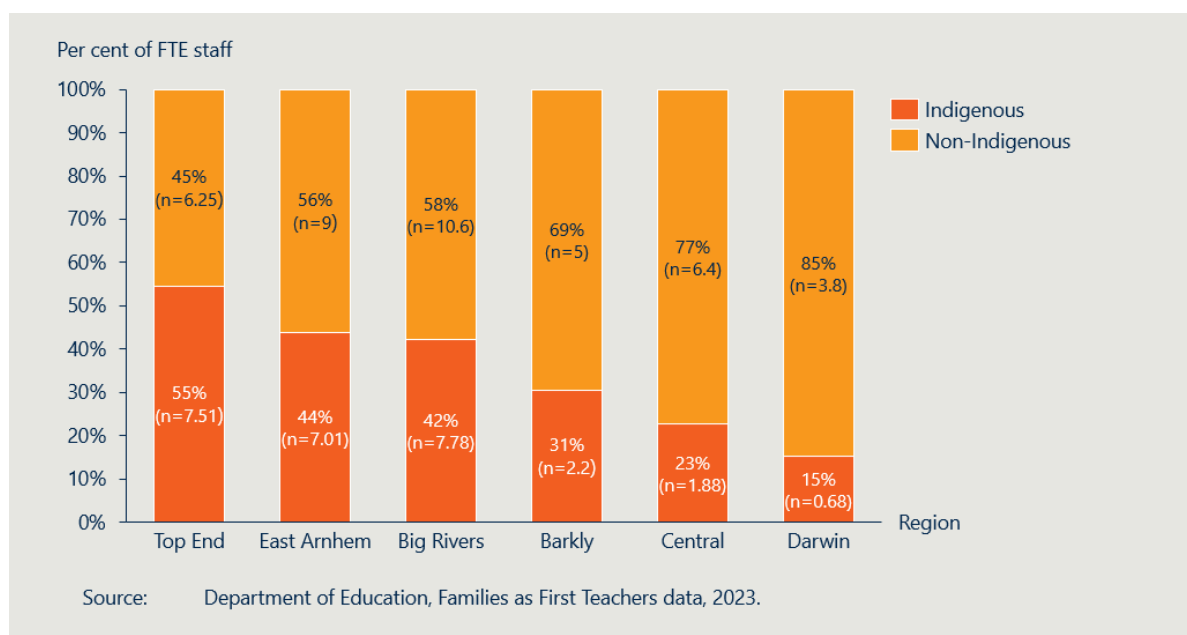
At present, new FLOs receive formal training in 3a as part of their induction, with an annual recertification as a practitioner strongly encouraged. They also receive ASQ-TRAK. Some FaFT staff have pursued further tertiary education with departmental support, including through the Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education (RATE) program. In focus groups, FLOs said that access to such training opportunities often depended on other competing priorities at their school, particularly where the limited availability of cover staff makes it difficult to take extended time out for training or study.

While acknowledging the value of the ad hoc support provided, we note that there is currently no explicit strategy within the FAFT program to engage suitable FLOs with the RATE program. There appears to be interest and capacity among FLOs for this, but there was a sense amongst stakeholders that more direct support and guidance from the Department would help strengthen training opportunities.

FaFT creates direct and indirect employment opportunities

The program clearly creates employment opportunities for local Aboriginal people, and this is an important outcome. Of the 96 FaFT staff employed across NTG-operated program sites in 2023, 50 identified as Aboriginal. The proportion varies between regions, with a significantly lower proportion of Aboriginal staff working in urban locations, as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22 | Proportion of FaFT staff who identify as Aboriginal, by region, 2022



In addition to staff employed directly in the FaFT program, stakeholders also reported a number of other school-based employment opportunities that were realised through participation in FaFT. Over time, many FaFT parents have been referred to and recruited for positions such as teaching assistants and other roles.

6.1.4 FaFT has enabled quality engagement by parents and carers in their children's learning and development

All stakeholders reported that most participating parents and carers engaged in the program activities with their children. Many parents in these communities said they were confident in their understanding of the 3a and had successfully incorporated learning games and conversational reading in their home environment.

"Would you do that at home too?"

Yeah, now I do. But I didn't do it before. I only learnt that from here."

— FaFT parent from remote community

FaFT staff noted that some parents had difficulty in understanding how to participate in 3a activities and how to apply the 3a strategies. They indicated that educators needed to be conscious of the reading level of parents when delivering FaFT to ensure their successful participation in 3a.⁷⁷

Others shared that some parents found the 'three S' or the 'three N' strategies were too complex or too numerous to remember. FaFT staff at some sites felt that this had affected both attendance numbers and actual engagement during program sessions, due to a sense of stigma or shame around any challenges associated with using the materials or undertaking the activities. This challenge was overcome at other sites through careful coaching by FaFT educators.

The importance of community ownership at these sites was also evident, as it meant parents were participating in activities that they had chosen and had an interest in. This translated into a stronger motivation to engage.

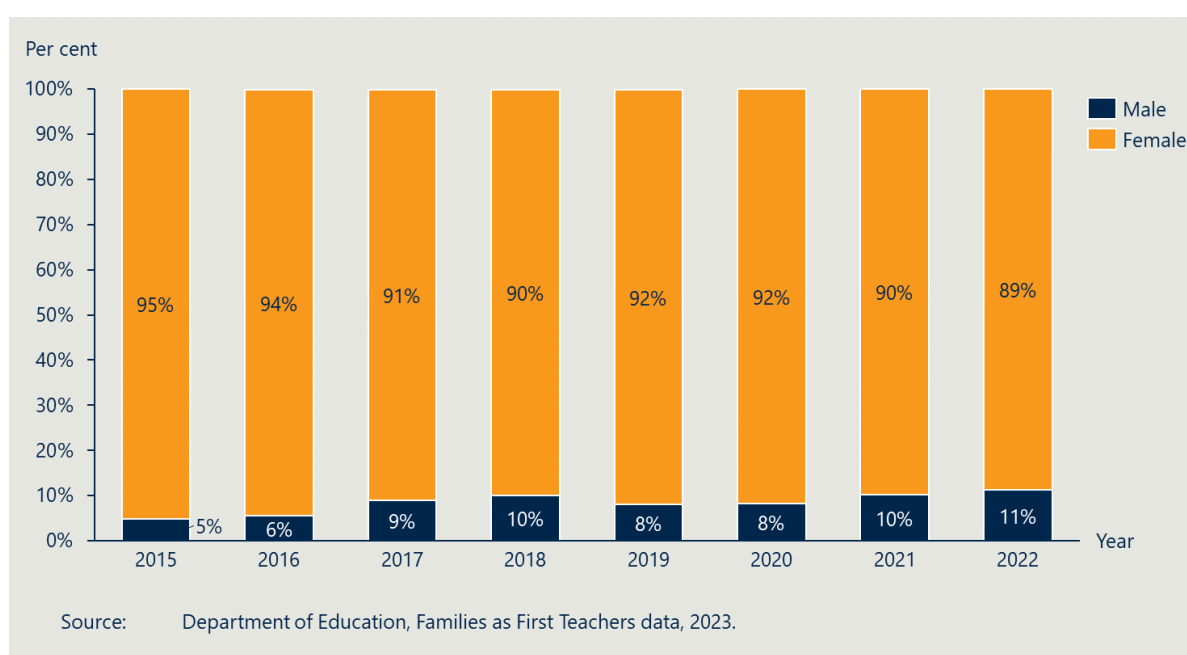
⁷⁷ A particular English reading level is not required to be successful in 3a.

Participating parents are primarily female, but the proportion of male participants has grown.

From 2015 to 2022, the proportion of male parent participants rose from 5 per cent to 11 per cent, as shown in Figure 23 | Gender of parent participants, all sites, 2015-2022 below, but overall male participation remains low. Stakeholders attributed low male participation to several factors, including:

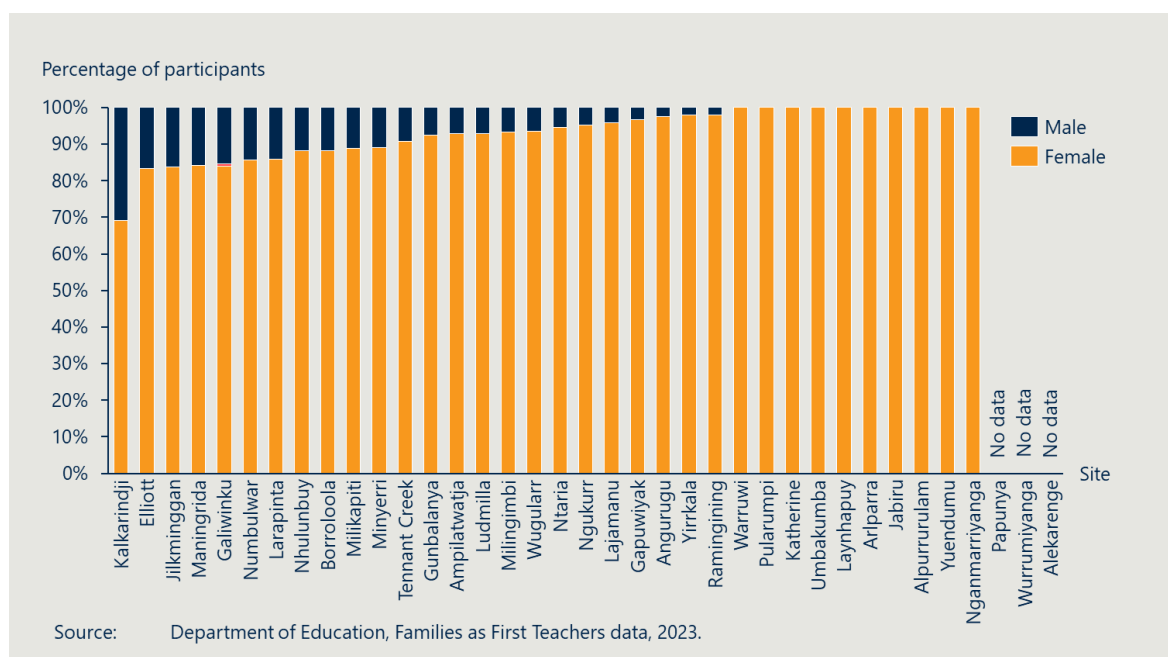
- A perception within communities that FaFT is a women's space, influenced by traditional views on gender roles in child care.
- The scheduling of FaFT during school hours, when many men were unavailable due to work commitments.
- Cultural considerations that can arise from having men and women in the same space, including avoidance, appropriateness and jealousy.

Figure 23 | Gender of parent participants, all sites, 2015-2022



The proportion of male participants varies between sites. It reached 31 per cent in Kalkarindji and is above 10 per cent in 10 other locations. There was a higher representation of men in sites that had deliberately targeted fathers through such engagement strategies as 'FaFT at Footy', where outreach sessions were held at an evening Australian Rules football match. This helped overcome both the gendered view of FaFT as a women's space, and the overlap between program hours and work hours. Figure 24 shows the variation in participation by gender across all FaFT sites.

Figure 24 | Gender of FaFT parent participants, by site, 2022



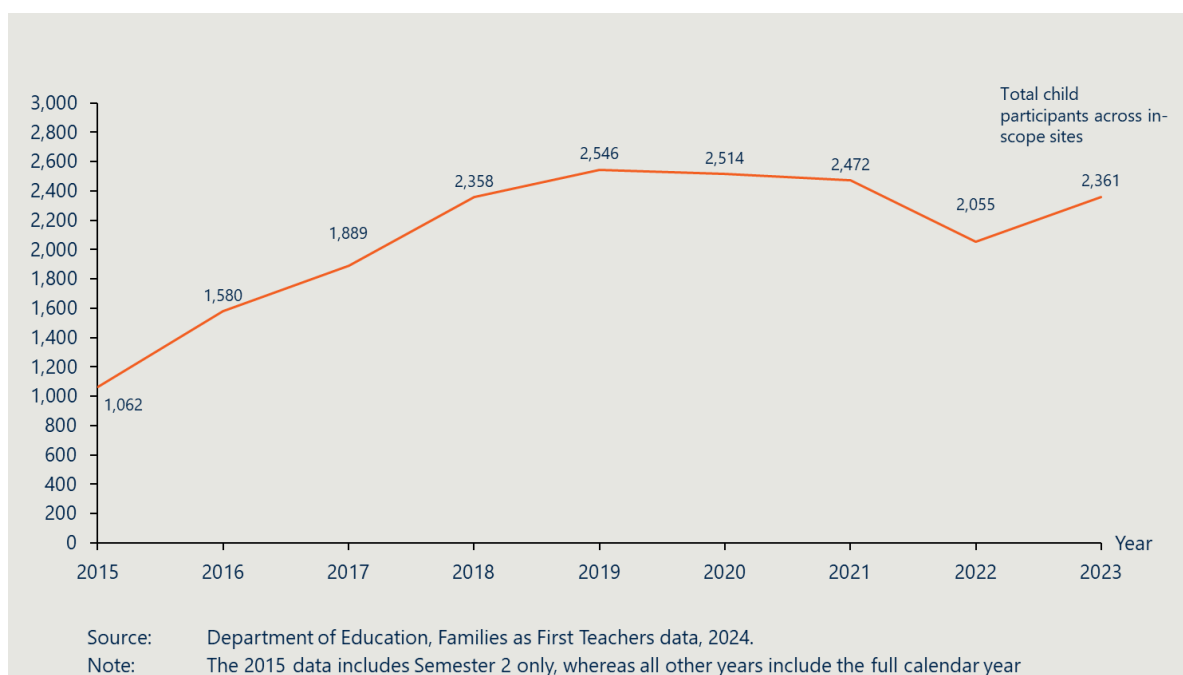
There are some important examples of respected male figures becoming involved in FaFT. In our fieldwork for the Galiwin'ku case study, we met the grandfather of a FaFT child who also serves as a cultural adviser and assists with delivery of the Learning on Country program.

6.2 While the level of participation varies across sites, total enrolments for the program have grown

6.2.1 Total enrolments have increased since 2015 and appear to be in line with NTRAI benchmarks

The number of children who engaged at least once in FaFT grew each year from 2015 to 2019, remained stable from 2019 to 2021, declined suddenly and significantly in 2022. The 2023 enrolment figures show that the sudden decline reversed, and enrolment levels returned to close to the 2021 figures. This is outlined in Figure 25 overleaf.

Figure 25 | Number of children who engaged with FaFT at least once, all 40 sites in scope, 2015-2023



Through 2015-19, the number of children enrolled in FaFT grew by an average of 20 per cent per year. This was influenced by the opening of new FaFT sites over this period, as well as an overall increase in enrolments in existing locations. From 2019 to 2021, the number of children enrolled plateaued, before dropping significantly in 2022. COVID-19 appears to have been the driving factor in the 2022 decline – due to enforced restrictions and the reluctance of families to attend group activities⁷⁸. In addition, data from Papunya was not recorded at all during 2022 as it was inactive (due to a lack of staff).

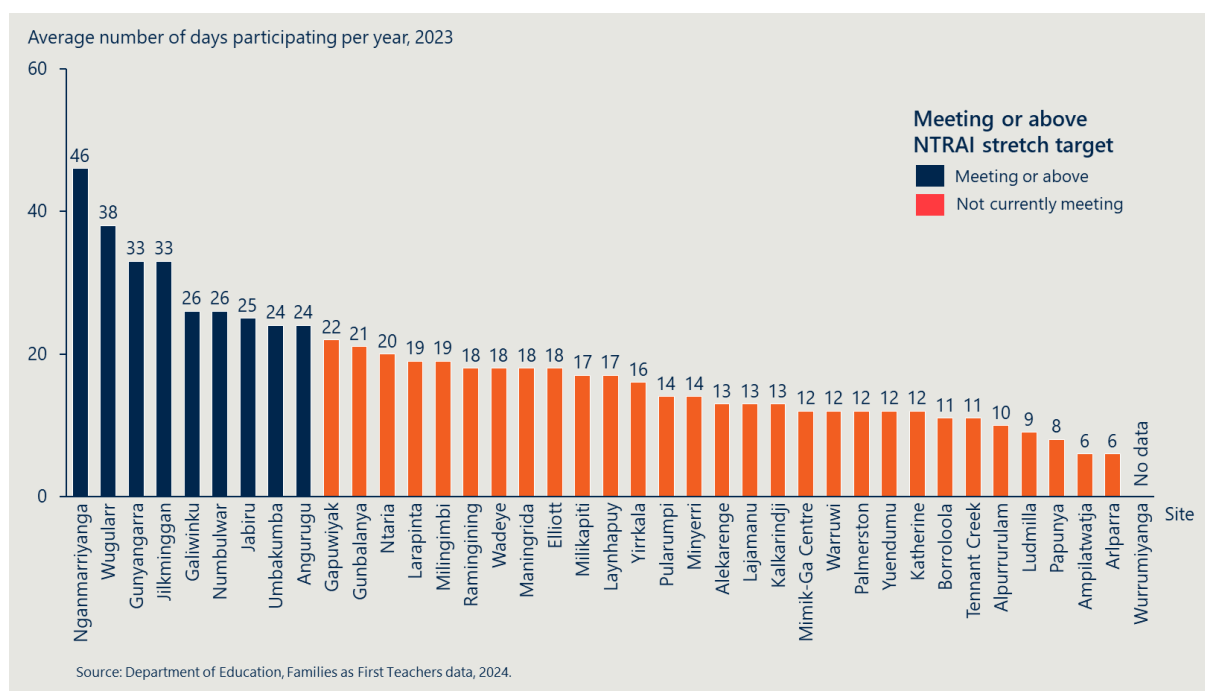
The recovery seen in the enrolment data in 2023 – a 17 per cent increase and a return almost to 2021 levels – appears to be the result of diminishing impacts COVID-19, as well as a targeted effort in particular sites to raise the profile of FaFT (e.g. through community engagement and partnerships). Twenty-five of the 40 sites experienced positive growth in enrolment, with Ampilatwatja, Gapuwiyak and Alekarenge all achieving 100 per cent growth or greater, and Katherine, Elliott and Tennant Creek experience between 70 and 90 per cent growth. In addition, Papunya resumed operations in 2023.

6.2.2 Participation levels vary significantly, suggesting potential for more participation, and more impact

While enrolment data details the number of children attending at least one day per year, the participation data details how many days on average each child participates (attends) per site per year. This is illustrated in Figure 26 overleaf, and shows that in 2023 nine sites achieved equal to or greater than the NTRAI stretch target of 24 average days participating per year (discussed in 3.4 of this report).

⁷⁸ After the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions on attending school in 2020, the FaFT program distributed home learning packs for children to continue participating in FaFT from home.

Figure 26 | Average number of days children participate in FaFT per year



The evaluation team also received a more detailed breakdown of participation data for each of the 12 sites visited, showing the distribution of children based on the number of days they attended FaFT per week per site in Term 4 2022. This is outlined in Table 7.

Table 7 | FaFT participation per week, Term 4 2022⁷⁹

FaFT Site	Days attended per week				≥4
	<1	1	2	3	
Arlparra	41.4%	37.9%	17.2%	3.4%	-
Galiwin'ku	61.5%	20.8%	7.3%	4.2%	6.3%
Gunbalanya	29.2%	41.7%	12.5%	12.5%	4.2%
Jabiru	66.7%	20.0%	6.7%	6.7%	-
Katherine	46.9%	43.8%	9.4%	-	-
Larapinta	35.2%	38.9%	13.0%	11.1%	1.9%
Laynhapuy Homelands	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%	-	-

⁷⁹ Source: Department of Education and Training, Families as First Teachers data, 'Staircase Reports'

Maningrida	43.6%	31.9%	11.7%	8.5%	4.3%
Mimik-Ga Centre	39.6%	56.6%	3.8%	-	-
Ntaria	23.5%	41.2%	29.4%	5.9%	-
Palmerston	66.7%	29.6%	2.5%	1.2%	-
Yirrkala	60.0%	22.9%	14.3%	2.9%	-

Across the 12 sites visited by the evaluation, most families attended FaFT one day per week or less (ranging from 64 per cent to 96 per cent). There was one site (Ntaria) that had more than 35 per cent of children attending two or more days; with four sites seeing at least 20 per cent of children attend two or more days; four sites seeing at least 10 per cent of children attend two or more days; and three sites seeing less than 10 per cent of children attend two or more days⁸⁰.

This data suggests that a concentrated number of families are highly engaged and attend frequently, while the majority of enrolled families attend less frequently but are nevertheless engaged in the program. It is important to note that a family who attends on average once a week (i.e. around 40 days per year in total) would be on track to far exceed the current NTRAI stretch target of 24 days per year.

Additionally, this data focuses on participation at FaFT and does not capture any play-based learning using the 3a strategies at home, making it difficult to assess the total 'dosage' that each child receives. As the literature review notes, there is no established consensus on the ideal program dosage, but it is clear from the evidence that quality carer/child engagement at home amplifies the effects of interactions at the FaFT site, thereby further contributing to improved developmental outcomes for children.⁸¹

Notwithstanding the progress to date, FaFT's impact in terms of developmental outcomes could be extended through greater efforts to support higher levels of participation, particularly in some sites. This would in large part involve addressing the barriers identified throughout section 5.1.3, including through more targeted outreach and engagement.

6.3 Progress on most long-term outcomes is apparent

There is qualitative evidence that FaFT has, in at least some cases, resulted in:

- children showing improved developmental and learning outcomes and wellbeing
- children having a strengthened sense of identity and connection to their home
- parents and carers demonstrating improved parenting capacity and confidence
- children having a positive transition to preschool
- Aboriginal staff having positive employment outcomes.

Each of these outcome areas are discussed below.

⁸⁰ The three sites with less than 10% of children attending 2 or more days were the three urban sites visited by the evaluation: Larapinta, Mimik-ga and Palmerston.

⁸¹ Page, J et al. (2019). An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, 233–250.

Note that there is limited evidence on whether FaFT has improved employment pathways for Aboriginal staff, socioeconomic outcomes for communities, or service integration with inter-governmental and departmental strategic initiatives. Data limitations (discussed in Section 2.3.3) make it difficult to conclusively demonstrate to what extent, and how consistently, these long-term outcomes of FaFT have been achieved. The following commentary is therefore based primarily on qualitative information. This includes our analysis of the evidentiary basis for FaFT's design, from which we can make reasonable inferences about likely outcomes in these areas.

6.3.1 Children who participate consistently in FaFT show improved developmental and learning outcomes and wellbeing

Multiple stakeholders pointed to significant individual "success stories" among children who had consistently participated in FaFT, describing transformative changes for some children in their developmental and learning outcomes and overall wellbeing. One staff member stated: "I've seen kids pretty much go from failure to thrive to being the ones getting the attendance certificates five days a week". The reported outcomes in terms of development, learning and wellbeing include:

- **Early intervention** – Through ASQ-TRAK and general observations, FaFT staff have been able to help parents identify potential developmental challenges early and refer families to appropriate health and support services. Staff drew on the trusting relationship established with many FaFT parents to hold these discussions in a respectful and effective way, allowing for early diagnosis, support and treatment where needed.
- **Social skills and confidence** – Many staff and parents reported the marked improvement in children's confidence and socialising because of FaFT. This is exemplified through children having the confidence to interact with and engage with not only other children, but other parents and staff. Children have also demonstrated increased social skills such as sharing and cooperation.
- **Language ability** – With the 3a strategies focusing on language-rich activities, many children showed an increase in their ability to communicate. Several non-verbal children started using language more openly and confidently after participating in FaFT.
- **Life skills and support** – The FaFT activities often incorporate important life skills as part of the routine, including washing hands and tidying up. In addition, external services tend to promote healthy habits, such as good oral health and nutrition. Both parents and staff saw positive impacts from this.

This is consistent with the findings from the literature review into evidence underpinning key elements of the FaFT model – most notably the application of the Abecedarian method. The fidelity of the FaFT program to that method gives us greater confidence in the qualitative findings above, suggesting that they are not only robust, but are likely to be representative across the range of FaFT sites where the good-practice elements outlined earlier in this report and in the literature review (see Table 5) are evident.

6.3.2 FaFT fosters children's sense of identity and connection to their home

In many sites, FaFT successfully fostered children's sense of identity and connection to home, particularly through cultural activities such as going fishing, cooking damper, and collecting pandanus leaves and nuts. Other examples are:

- At one site, the FaFT learning space has a wall that shows the different skin groups. Upon enrolment, each child's photo is displayed, so they know who they are related to and how.

- Parents at another site said their children had learned how to say their own name and the names of various family members, and to identify which house they lived in. The parents felt this helped strengthen the child's sense of identity and connection to family.

Much of the success in this outcome area has been driven by participating families having input into activity selection and local program design. Again, this was highlighted in the literature review as a key element of good practice and an important contributor to child development outcomes. One of the key enablers of cultural connection has been the willingness and capacity of the FE to consult with participating families and incorporate their feedback into the design and implementation of the program. As noted earlier, however, the extent and quality of family consultation and input has varied between sites.

"We are able to go out on country and collect pandanus or go fishing and so, as the arts centre, we facilitate a lot of those things... I think the beauty of it is all the little bubs watching the ladies weave and seeing that consistently." – Service provider

6.3.3 FaFT has built parents' capacity and confidence, but there is scope to make education workshops even more effective

The evaluation could not conclusively determine the extent of the improvement of parental capacity across FaFT locations. Consultations with FaFT sites produced numerous positive examples of parents' increased confidence in their own abilities, and knowledge about child development. In our Galiwin'ku case study, we encountered several mothers who said they felt more confident, not just in terms of engaging with their children, but also in navigating the 'Balanda' world.

A theme across remote sites, however, was that educational workshops for parents could be implemented in a more consistent manner, and that more opportunities for capacity-building could be incorporated into existing activities. In certain cases, the workshops were not seen as being suitably responsive to the local community context or needs of participating families. These points are further explored below.

Parental education in FaFT's urban locations has been well-received

Many parents from urban FaFT sites offered high praise for the parental educational workshops held there. These outline children's developmental milestones, impart important parenting skills and raise awareness about services to access for assistance. Younger and first-time parents found the parental capacity building element of FaFT particularly helpful, given they generally felt less confident and more anxious about taking care of their new child or children. Knowing when babies can progress from breastfeeding to eating solid foods, for example, and steps to take when a baby is throwing a tantrum, meant they could develop and apply practical strategies with more certainty.

Parents from migrant families were similarly positive about the program's parent education workshops; almost all of them were interested in having more sessions. They found the workshops relevant to challenges they were experiencing – for example, in establishing regular sleeping patterns for their child. An unintended positive outcome for migrant families was help in learning how to navigate Australia's migration and visa services, as well as building stronger English skills. This came about through informal interactions with program staff and other parents, sharing advice and experiences, building support networks and making new friends. Some FaFT staff had been proactive in providing this additional guidance and support even though it is not a formal component of the FaFT program.

"It has changed lives. Exposure to the parents' engagement aspect of the program has helped them learn about children's brain development and other needs." – FaFT urban staff member

Parent confidence has improved in remote locations, but parental education workshops at some sites could be made more relevant to the community context

Most parents said FaFT provided a safe space that enabled them to improve their confidence as parents. Initially very shy about coming and engaging with the program, they said FaFT staff had been very welcoming and had put them at ease. This is an important achievement as it appears to have, in turn, fostered

"I used to bring myself. I was ashamed. I wasn't confident to sit with them. I used to bring the kids every day and I started to get strong." – FaFT FLO and parent

parents' confidence to engage with official institutions and services that could provide additional support. Once engaged, parents in some of these FaFT sites were also able to build practical computer skills, which also assisted in connecting them to relevant services and giving them access to items not available in community.

FaFT staff reported that they had observed progress in parental confidence but stressed that the process could take time, and that a lot of effort was needed to sustain and grow the relationship. Of note is that many sites pointed to the success stories of participant mothers who had gone on to take up the FLO position when it became available, after having built confidence and leadership through participation in FaFT.

Where parental educational workshops were adapted to and responsive to community needs, they were well received and the results "stuck". Two examples of successful parental education activities were:

- **The brain story** – FaFT parents reported learning about children's brain development and the extent to which children are receptive to educational experiences from an early age.
- **Yolŋu Yothu Dhurkarr** – a place-based description of child development milestones aligned to Yolŋu cultural practices, which made the concept more relevant and accessible. Parents and even some external community members referenced the importance of this in one of the site visits.

Where some workshops were reportedly less successful, with minimal impact or take up of the promoted skills or behaviours, providers noted that this likely reflects the challenge of reversing ingrained habits, the difficulty of adapting workshops to the local context, and addressing multiple causes for low confidence, knowledge and skill levels at once. It also speaks to the sporadic nature of the workshops. External providers such as NT Health practitioners typically deliver their workshops in communities as a one-off, with minimal opportunity for follow-up or progress monitoring.

Further, stakeholders point to two other significant contextual factors that weakened the impact of capacity building workshops:

- **Quality and cost of food in local stores** – some service providers pointed to business practices in community shops that facilitated and promoted unhealthy food. In general, unhealthier food options are much cheaper and more accessible compared to fresh products in these stores. This can impede the application of nutritional strategies learned through FaFT.
- **Lack of appropriate goods/services** – some capacity building activities assume that families have access to facilities and equipment that in reality may not exist in some communities, particularly small communities. For example, workshops around preventing and treating skin conditions often focus on the importance of washing clothes and bed sheets. However many families in remote communities do not have access to a washing machine or hot water that can kill scabies bugs.

6.3.4 FaFT supports successful transition to preschool

Stakeholders generally reported positive outcomes in terms of FaFT preparing children for successful transition to preschool, with several highlighting this as one of the main strengths of the program. This

outcome was achieved not only through the learning activities, but through the exposure to structures and routines. Several commented that FaFT was a key strategic mechanism to increase school attendance in communities where children struggle to engage with school. The elements that supported a positive transition to preschool included:

- **Building familiarity with the school environment** – stakeholders said that, where FaFT sites are co-located or in close proximity to the main school campus, this reduced the level of intimidation felt and altered perceptions about school being a ‘foreign’ place. This was aided in some sites by collaborative activities between FaFT and the preschool and / or the main school, such as walk-through tours of the preschool for FaFT children, or FaFT children performing in school concerts and similar events.
- **Developing structure and routine** – most FaFT sites follow some kind of planned structure each day, while retaining flexibility to adapt to the needs of the families and children in attendance. Activities are often timed and sequenced in a purposeful way – for example, starting the session with a song, sitting down together to eat morning tea, doing an activity outside and then doing mat time to read books together. Some sites used particular songs or sounds as a signal for certain activities, such as having a “tidy up” song at the end of a game, or a “come inside” song after outdoor activities. Staff and parents reflected that developing this understanding of structure and routine were critical for successful transition to preschool.
- **Strengthening confidence and social skills** – staff and parents felt that the benefits of FaFT in terms of increased confidence from interactions helped give children a stronger foundation for entering the schooling system and interacting with other children. Compared to children who did not participate in the program, staff reported that FaFT children were more independent and resilient once attending preschool and were overall more “ready” for preschool.

“When I talk about “ready for school”, I talk more about collaboration, cooperation, their resilience, whether they can take turns or share things. What their self-help skills are, can they go to the toilet, can they find a lunchbox, can they cut up fruit... That, to me, is school readiness and that's what they're getting a taste of here.” – Service provider

Some stakeholders noted that over-prioritisation of ‘preschool readiness’ created tension with other elements of FaFT

Several principals, service providers and former corporate staff reported that the objective of supporting a positive transition to preschool had led to an increased focus on both improving literacy and numeracy and establishing clear structures and routines. Stakeholders observed that while these were both highly impactful areas to focus on, they could lead to tension in the following ways:

- Increased focus on literacy and numeracy had led to overly structured sessions that did not allow families the flexibility to decide what they want to do, and specifically in terms of literacy had influenced the site’s FaFT educators to prioritise the use of English over first language.
- Increased focus on structure and routine, particularly by mirroring the early morning school start time, reduced the extent to which the site was able to adapt to the majority of families’ lifestyle and sleep cycle, which involved waking up later in the morning.

We note that these are site-level observations rather than program-wide, and they do not support a case for de-prioritising the efforts made to support a positive transition to preschool; however, it is an important tension to consider in what kinds of activities are most effective overall in supporting children to make that transition.

6.3.5 Aboriginal staff reported positive employment outcomes

There is limited quantitative data to assess whether FaFT has improved employment and socioeconomic outcomes for Aboriginal staff beyond the creation of FE and FLO positions that could be filled by Aboriginal people. In focus groups, most FLOs spoke favourably about the working conditions, including pay and holiday entitlements. They noted that the position provided higher salaries than other jobs in the community, and the consistency of pay, including through school holidays, was a strength (compared to casual education jobs that would end during holidays, leaving staff to apply for Centrelink until work recommenced the following term).

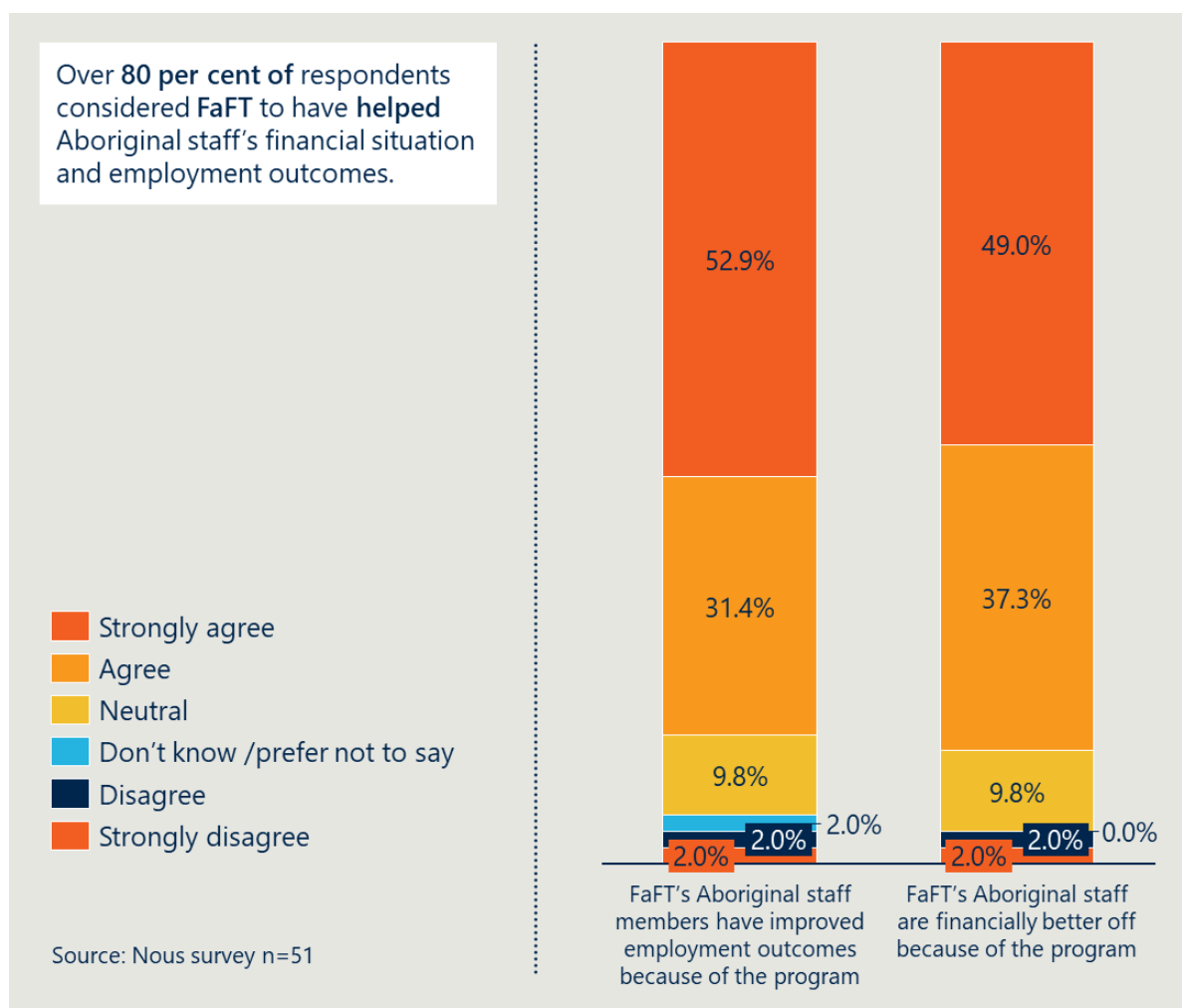
A majority of program staff and school principal survey respondents were positive about FaFT in this respect. Over 80 per cent of respondent agreed that the program had improved Aboriginal staff's financial situation and employment opportunities, as shown in Figure 27 overleaf. Stakeholders also noted the enabling factor that FaFT played in helping former parents obtain work in other parts of the school, including as teaching assistants.

The FLO role provides the main employment opportunity for local Aboriginal people within the FaFT program. All FLOs in non-urban sites were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Many of those consulted for the evaluation had worked in their position for relatively long periods – often for more than two years. The contribution of FaFT to Aboriginal employment was recognised in 2017 with a Chief Minister's Award.

In many cases FLOs were recruited after having been participants in the program. This had mutually reinforcing benefits, for many participant parents said they felt more comfortable knowing their FLO had participated in program; it helped build trust in the FLO and the program overall.

Most FLOs are employed on 0.4 or 0.6 FTE basis. Many of the part-time FLOs consulted in the evaluation indicated that they appreciated the flexibility afforded by their part time schedule, allowing them time to look after their own families (among other things).

Figure 27 | FaFT staff survey questions on Aboriginal employee outcomes



Some FLOs have stayed in their positions for extended periods (in some cases, more than ten years), while others have subsequently taken up other educational roles in the school setting, typically as assistant teachers. However, there are limited growth opportunities for FLOs within the current FaFT staffing model, given that a tertiary early childhood education qualification is required to move into a FE position.

FaFT sites servicing Aboriginal homelands (e.g. Arlparra and Laynhapuy Homelands) use a particular homelands model to employ one or more playgroup leaders to coordinate FaFT at times when the FE and FLO were delivering FaFT at another homeland site. Program funding did not cover this, and so the costs were met from the general school budget. Playgroup leaders are encouraged to participate in 3a training but acquire some of the skills and knowledge through ad hoc support by the FE and FLO. This practice arguably puts further limits on the career paths for people in remote communities (and risks diluting program integrity).

6.3.6 Service integration and partnerships are important and could be further strengthened

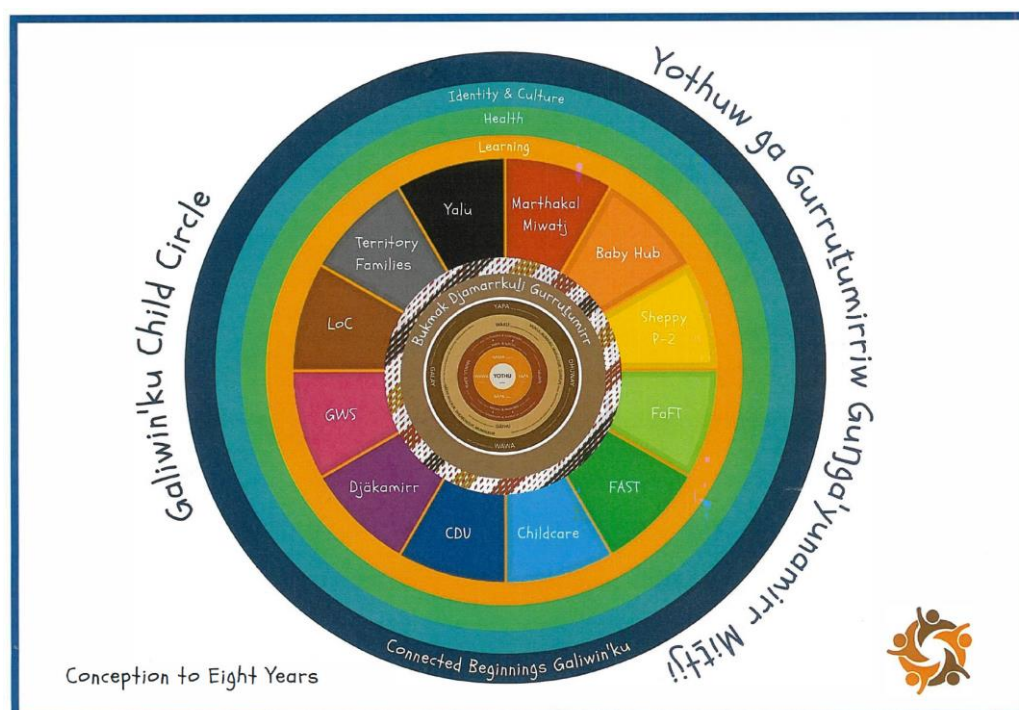
Research has underlined the importance of building equal relationships to building trust and connections, and to sharing knowledge.⁸² As outlined in 6.1.2, FaFT maintains a number of service partnerships, formally and informally. Effective partnerships enable better information sharing, consistent and targeted service delivery, and improved monitoring and program enhancement through integration with FaFT sites and external agencies, including government bodies.

At a community level, FaFT staff are critical to forging effective partnerships, which are often highly relational in nature and not necessarily embedded through formal arrangements. As noted earlier, this lack of formality can be beneficial to pragmatic and timely problem-solving, but we note it could also present a risk to their durability.

With respect to the scope of these partnerships, several stakeholders commented on the need for stronger connections with health providers to share data, underpinned by agreements between the Department and other relevant agencies. Establishing such arrangements would support more effective use of health data to inform program delivery and to measure outcomes. It may also enable more efficient and coordinated implementation of ASQ-TRAK developmental screening, noting that NT Health and other service providers also deliver these screenings in communities.

Overall, there was limited evidence of formal service integration and partnerships with other providers and agencies, with the exception of FaFT sites based in CFCs and sites where Connected Beginnings (CB) was in operation. CFC and CB sites have the additional resources and capacity to invest in coordination, and have been able to approach partnerships and service integration formally and strategically. For example, the Galiwin'ku CB site developed the Child Circle strategy to guide its collaboration with other services.

Figure 28 | Galiwin'ku Child Circle



⁸² See, for example, SNAICC (2012) *Improved Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: Learning from Good Practice*, [Improved Outcomes in ECEC Services \(snaicc.org.au\)](https://www.snaicc.org.au/publications/improved-outcomes-in-ecec-services)

6.4 FaFT had additional positive outcomes

In addition to the stated objectives of FaFT program design, there have been a number of unintended positive outcomes that were not specifically articulated in program objectives that emerged during the implementation of FaFT. These featured across several sites and were generally indicative of high-quality and responsive program delivery.

FaFT provided social support and built relationships among parents

Through the creation of a safe and welcoming space for parents, FaFT has been able to provide social support and the opportunity for parents to connect with each other. Parents are often encouraged to support each other in the application of 3a activities and the running of FaFT generally. Several program staff noted that parents typically were comfortable to look after each other's children at FaFT, indicating that they had formed trusting relationships with each other.

The social element of FaFT also allowed parents to share lessons and experiences with each other and provide each other with advice and support. One FaFT site highlighted that parents would talk to each

"I love it so much. It's a friendly and nice close environment where I just come and be with the young mums, you talk about everything in your family and kids and you make new friends rather than just being alone in the house." – Urban FaFT parent

other about challenges they were facing with sleep or breastfeeding, and they would ask each other questions about how to address this. In some urban sites, where there were several participating families that were recent migrants to Australia, FaFT provided the opportunity for parents to connect with each other and reduce the impact of social isolation. One stakeholder gave the example of a parent who invited all the other FaFT parents to her birthday party because they were the only

other adults that she knew in that community.

FaFT staff provided ad hoc non-program support to families

Some stakeholders commented positively on the capacity of FaFT staff to assist families in remote community to access and navigate other services. For example, some program staff would support families to access Centrelink using the school laptop, help fill out forms for school, or provide transport for families around the community. We also observed on several site visits to remote communities that FaFT staff would liaise with other services to bring deliveries with them, such as food, clothes, and equipment.

"Our daily activities can vary, we could be supporting a family to access Centrelink on a laptop, families with school forms or anything else above and beyond to make FaFT that one stop-shop." – Urban FaFT staff member

The provision of food at sites offered additional benefits

Families at one site said that provision of food by the program was a highly effective incentive for attending FaFT. Further, many parents took leftover food home with them to share with the rest of their families. One stakeholder raised the concern that, were FaFT to over-commit to the provision of food as an engagement strategy, it could make families more reliant on the program for food, which could have a disempowering effect. However, this should be viewed in the context of a primary goal being to increase participation in a program which, among other things, can support better food hygiene and nutrition as well as educational and social development.

7 Policy Implications and Recommendations

A range of considerations arise from the foregoing analysis that could usefully inform the future implementation and monitoring of the FaFT program. These are outlined below, followed by some specific recommendations for immediate action.

7.1 Implications for ongoing implementation and evaluation

This section offers suggestions on where ongoing policy development, program design and implementation might focus – both in terms to further improve outcomes from FaFT and to enable more comprehensive evaluation.

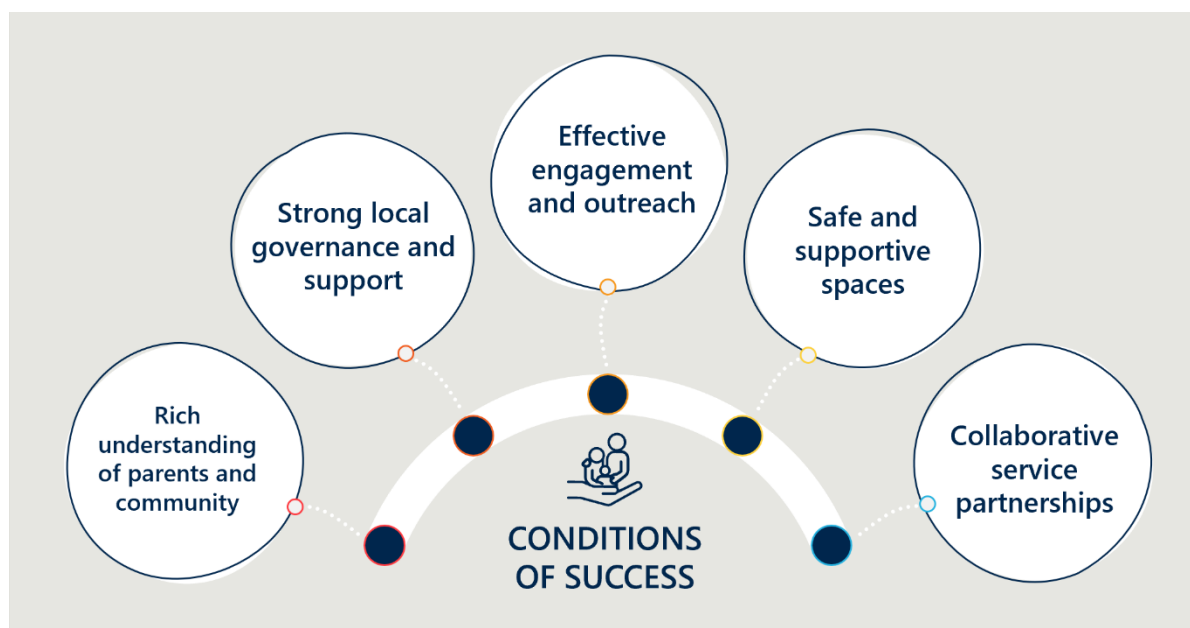
7.1.1 Implementation planning and monitoring of FaFT sites should take account of known conditions for success

The evaluation identified five mutually reinforcing attributes that high-performing FaFT sites hold common. Explicit recognition of these, for example as Key Performance Indicators for each FaFT site, can help to:

- set new FaFT sites up for success
- diagnose where and why progress or outcomes may not be meeting expectations
- provide an ongoing framework for FaFT staff to hold each other and their partners to account.

The five conditions for success identified through this evaluation are set out in Figure 29 and discussed further below.

Figure 29 | Five conditions for success at FaFT sites



- **Rich understanding of parents and community** – Where FaFT staff have a rich understanding of the needs of participating parents, the circumstances of non-participant parents and the overall needs and dynamics of the community, the site is better able to cultivate a relevant and effective program. This understanding is fostered through ad hoc interactions with families through FaFT sessions, organised yarning circles with families and community and building relationships with key leaders in the community, including through partner organisations.
- **Strong local governance and support** – Successful FaFT sites benefit from strong leadership and governance structures to ensure strategic alignment with the FaFT Outcomes Framework, help foster partnerships, manage risks and track performance. The role of the school is key: where principals understand and support the mission, scope and design of FaFT, sites are better positioned to fulfil their objectives. They can help create the authorising environment for FEs to be creative and adaptive (for example, running more outreach activities). But governance mechanisms also need to integrate other perspectives that facilitate effective accountability to the Department and to participating families and the community.
- **Effective engagement and outreach** – Effective engagement and outreach help FaFT sites to connect with more families and make FaFT more accessible. These strategies were essential for reaching the more at-risk, “hard-to-reach” families in the community. Strong engagement and outreach also increased the visibility of FaFT generally in the community, raising the profile and fostering greater interest amongst potential participants, including fathers and other male family members.
- **Safe and supportive spaces** – Successful FaFT sites create a welcoming space where parents, particularly mothers, feel safe and supported. These sites give parents the opportunity to socialise and build relationships with each other, as well as with the FaFT staff. Many parents describe FaFT as a safe and trusting environment, and many staff observed that over time parents will generally look after each other’s children at FaFT and trust other parents to do the same. By developing strong relationships with each other, parents can support each other with the FaFT activities.
- **Collaborative service partnerships** – Building strong, collaborative partnerships between FaFT sites and other service providers and agencies operating in the community creates a mutually beneficial relationship. FaFT sites can gather useful information and data to support their programs and build their understanding of the community’s needs. Service providers and other partner agencies can have more meaningful and targeted engagements with the families participating in FaFT.

7.1.2 A clearer focus on priorities within outcome areas can support more targeted monitoring and evaluation

The program logic for FaFT lists 11 short and long-term outcomes that the program aims to achieve. These outcomes are all relevant and important, and most are interdependent. However, in practice, some – notably those concerning outcomes for the participating children – will loom larger than others. From a monitoring point of view, it is useful to have a clear sense of the headline indicators that provide the strongest signal that all elements of the program are working to improve the developmental outcomes of participating children.

Other outcome areas, such as improved service integration, while a longer-term outcome in its own right, can also be a leading indicator and/or by-product of an effective FaFT program. In that sense it is a less critical aspect to be actively monitoring. That said, there may be a period of time when it is appropriate to investigate deeply this aspect of the FaFT model across the board to, for example, assess the more systemic issues that might be impeding the desired level of integration.

From a departmental perspective this means that it ought to be clear on the top 4-5 indicators – preferably measurable quantitatively – that will provide the strongest representation of FaFT’s impacts on

children, families and communities. These priority outcome areas should be subject to ongoing, robust monitoring.

We would suggest that, in addition to this ongoing focus on the headline indicators, the Department then select one or two other aspects of the program to investigate through thematic 'deep dives'. For example, it might wish to look closely at staff skill development, or children's sense of identity and connection. These could be done periodically as a complement to site-specific 'deep dives' to assess how the program is performing in certain locations, based on identification of risks to achieving the priority outcomes.

7.1.3 More can be done with the data that is available to better understand impact

The Department collects a significant amount of data from FaFT sites that is not in a usable format, but which could shed more light on program delivery and outcomes. A key example is the ECPAS data that records, amongst other things, the number of interactions between participating parents and their children while under observation at the sites. The purpose of FaFT is to improve the quantity and quality of those interactions so that children receive an even rich learning experience, complementing the loving and culturally rich interactions that occur in the home environment. Having access to data that measures this in a meaningful way would provide even more detailed and compelling insights into the difference that FaFT makes. If it is not possible to extract value from this data, its collection should be discontinued.

Another area of potential improvement is the linkage of FaFT data with information on health and other related outcomes for children and their families in FaFT communities. As noted in this report, FaFT brings incidental benefits to participants by improving understanding of the importance of hygiene or by making nutritious food available. While a child's physical development is captured in the AEDC, there are no other explicit health indicators that the program uses.

Work by the Menzies Institute into potential data linkage would enable a more comprehensive picture of the impact of FaFT, and we would encourage the Department to work with other agencies to explore further whether and how this could be achieved.

7.2 Recommendations

This section lists more specific recommendations for immediate action, based on the evaluation's findings related to FaFT's progress and outcomes to date.



RECOMMENDATIONS

RE-AFFIRM THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF FAFT IN THE BROADER ECEC SYSTEM AND BACK THAT IN

1. Redouble commitment to the program, including through further investment in:
 - the number of FLOs and their professional development
 - the provision of stronger corporate support from the Department.

BUILD ON FAFT'S STRENGTHS BY SUPPORTING INCREASED PARTICIPATION

2. Set site-specific engagement goals (in addition to broad participation targets), informed by the views of FaFT staff and community members, and by analysis of barriers and opportunities.
3. Continue to identify and address barriers to participation in the program to achieve higher uptake and more consistent participation, including through more determined community engagement

and targeted outreach activities at sites where this has fallen off.

4. Improve coverage within communities through a renewed focus on mobile and outreach services.

ACTIVELY SUPPORT SITES THAT ARE STRUGGLING

5. Assess which sites are struggling with capacity constraints or the presence of insurmountable barriers.
6. Consider stepping-up investment in the low-performing sites and sites with significant challenges (e.g. homelands; large communities with transport and / or significant food security challenges).

STRENGTHEN FAFT GOVERNANCE

7. Ensure Aboriginal representation in the governance of FaFT sites, including through the use of existing school governance boards and/or the establishment of local community advisory bodies made up of local Aboriginal leaders.
8. Provide support to those governance groups to ensure they are seeking the right data and making good use of it to inform decisions and maintain program fidelity.
9. Continue to promote stronger links between FaFT sites and schools to more effectively monitor transitions to preschool.
10. Engage with and seek strategic input and involvement from APONT Aboriginal Education Steering Committee through regular briefings and consultation.

DEVELOP THE FAFT WORKFORCE AND WORKFORCE PIPELINE

11. Recruit multiple FLOs at sites with high numbers of eligible children, multiple languages or broad geographic coverage (e.g. homelands).
12. Develop a strategic and consistent approach to education and training for FLOs.
13. Provide strong career pathway options for FLOs (including becoming Family Educators or supporting transition to other related roles in the community).
14. Create additional opportunities other than annual conferences and regional forums for FaFT staff, including FLOs, to share learnings and widen their support networks.

UPDATE THE FAFT POLICY FRAMEWORK

15. Develop a clearer view on how the model should be varied for sites that do not serve a predominantly Aboriginal community.
16. Develop strong criteria for future site selection, that takes account of known barriers and enablers. This could take the form of a 'maturity' or 'readiness' matrix for communities to self-assess or be assessed against, with components covering, for example, levels of:
 - Need – the number of families with children in the target age range
 - Support – local community support, and interest of other services in partnerships
 - Capacity (physical) – available sites and facilities
 - Capacity (people) – available workforce
 - Leadership – local sponsors who can provide governance, including to develop strategy and monitor performance.

IMPROVE MONITORING OF FAFT OUTCOMES

17. Ensure that the proposed new evaluation framework fully reflects the outcomes FaFT is striving for and demonstrates relevance to strategic priorities such as Closing the Gap.
18. Take a more systematic view towards data collection and analysis, including to deepen understanding of participation as well as key short-term outcomes (such as quantity and quality of interactions) and longer-term outcomes (such as preschool transitions).
19. Follow through on recommendations of the Menzies Centre study of the potential to link education and health datasets to deliver a more complete picture of child development outcomes.
20. Improve coordination between schools and the Department of Health in ASQ-TRAK screening, including with a view to improving information sharing, removing duplication of activities and avoiding unnecessary expense and burden on participating families.
21. Identify site-specific measures of success, reflecting key areas of focus, and track these closely, in conjunction with the relevant governance group.

Appendix A Case studies

This appendix presents five individual case studies from site visits to Ntaria, Katherine, Arlparra, Jabiru and Laynhapuy Homelands. The analysis in these case studies is drawn from data collection and site visits conducted in 2023 and reflect the state of the program at each site at that point in time.

Case study: Ntaria

Context for Ntaria FaFT

Population: 605

Percentage of population who are Aboriginal: 89.9 per cent

Main languages (other than English): Western Arrernte, Arrernte, Pitjantjatjara, German, Luritja

Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage: 629 (extremely disadvantaged)

Outstations: none

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 2021

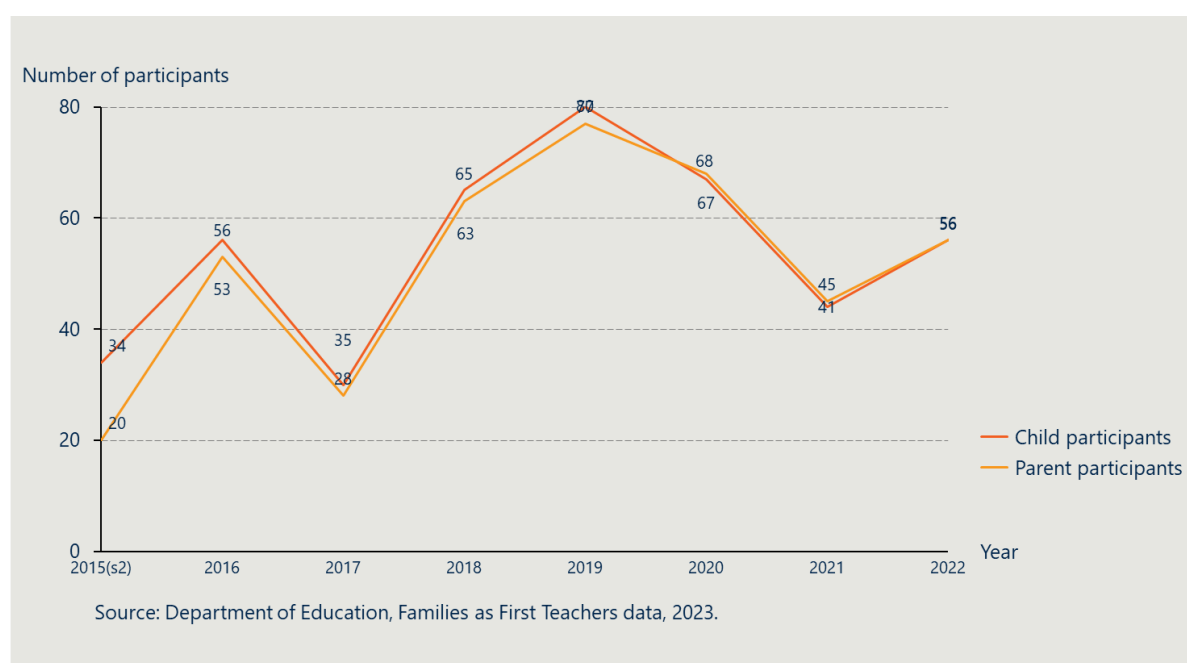
Ntaria, also known as Hermannsburg, was one of the original 21 FaFT sites established in 2009. Ntaria is situated in Central Australia and the main language used in community is Western Arrernte. 9.7 per cent of people speak only English at home.⁸³

FaFT is based at Ntaria school. Prior to FaFT the same building operated a childcare centre. Currently FaFT is the only service in community which is aimed at children from birth to age four.

Key activities, outputs and outcomes

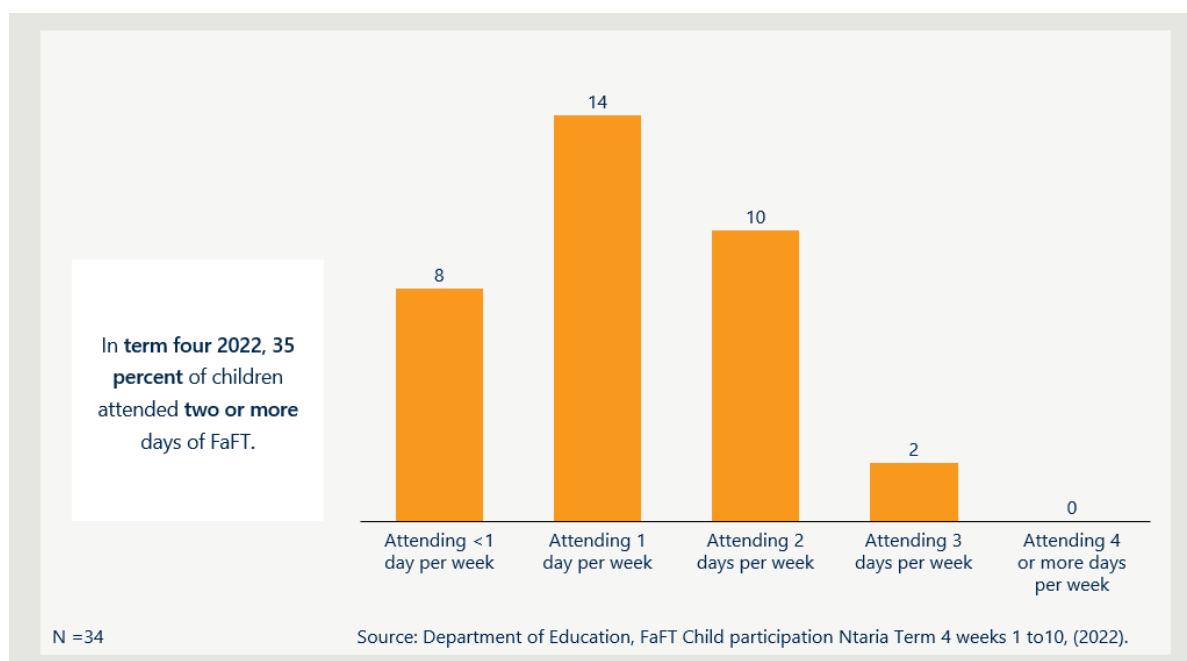
Figure 30 shows the number of children and parents that engaged with Ntaria FaFT at least once that year from 2015 to 2022. Ntaria's average participation data (term four, 2022) also positions this as a stronger FaFT site as seen in Figure 31. However, on the day of the site visit, there were no children present.

Figure 30 | Number of child participants (who attended at least once that year), 2015-2022



⁸³ ABS data 2021 census Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021). 'Language used at home', *Census of Population and Housing* [<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/cultural-diversity/language-used-home-lanp>], accessed 4 August 2023

Figure 31 | Ntaria FaFT term four 2022 average child participation



Stakeholders reported that children who attend Ntaria FaFT engage in 3a activities. These include enriched caregiving while regularly brushing teeth, learning games and conversational reading with books provided from the Indigenous Literacy Foundation's (ILF) Book Buzz program.

Ntaria FaFT maintained connections with several community partners and service providers including Wanta Aboriginal Corporation, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and a child health nurse from the local clinic. These stakeholders promoted FaFT, conducted ear, dental and other health checks and Wanta facilitated two FaFT excursions to the local community pool.

FaFT staff and community service providers noted that successful outcomes included the development of a greater social support network for mothers, improved child socialisation, and improved child health.

Enablers

FaFT environment – some community service providers said FaFT was a more appealing environment to conduct immunisations than the clinic, where children were often scared.

Incentives – food was considered an important incentive in attracting more regular family attendance. Excursions to the local swimming pool were also of significant appeal to families who attended in larger numbers on these days.

Challenges

Service partnerships – the Ntaria child health nurse did not regularly visit FaFT and did not deliver many ASQ-TRAK screening questionnaires or parent capacity building sessions about health literacy.

Difficulties in families applying program knowledge – Ntaria FaFT staff cited difficulties in guiding some parents in 3a activities as they either struggled to apply them or were uninterested in them.

Challenges in family engagement – staff reported that many families attended FaFT irregularly, noting many families travelled away from the community for long periods. The changing and transient nature of the cohort limited the extent to which staff could tailor and adapt their learning plans.

Case study: Katherine

Contextual background of Katherine FaFT

Population: 9,643

Percentage of population who are Aboriginal:
25.5 per cent

Main languages (other than English): Kriol

**Index of Community Socio-Educational
Advantage:** 672 (MacFarlane Primary School)

Outstations: Not applicable

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 2021

Katherine FaFT was established in 2017 at MacFarlane Primary School, under Stage two of the Indigenous education strategy.

MacFarlane Primary School caters for a diverse community including migrant families, the children of RAF base families, but local Aboriginal families constitute a strong majority of the school's participants.

At the time of the evaluation site visit, both the Principal and the FE at MacFarlane Primary School had recently commenced.

Key activities, outputs and outcomes

Figure 32 shows the number of parents and children that engaged with Katherine FaFT at least once that year from 2017 to 2022 (note data was not available for parents in 2017). This suggests that Katherine was one of FaFT's stronger sites in terms of coverage, but FaFT staff and parents noted that COVID had impacted participation and how the rebound from it had been slow. This was particularly the case with Aboriginal families as seen in Figure 33.

Figure 32 | Number of child participants (who attended at least once that year), 2017-2022

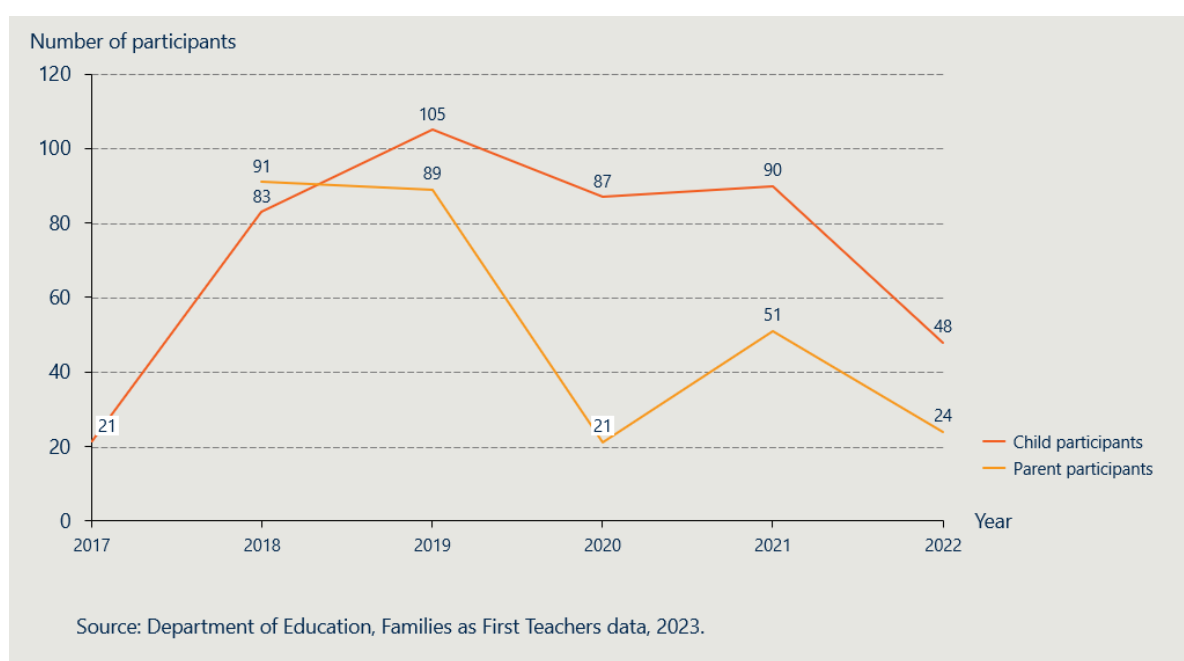


Figure 33 | Katherine FaFT child participants (who attended at least once a year), 2017-2022 by Aboriginality

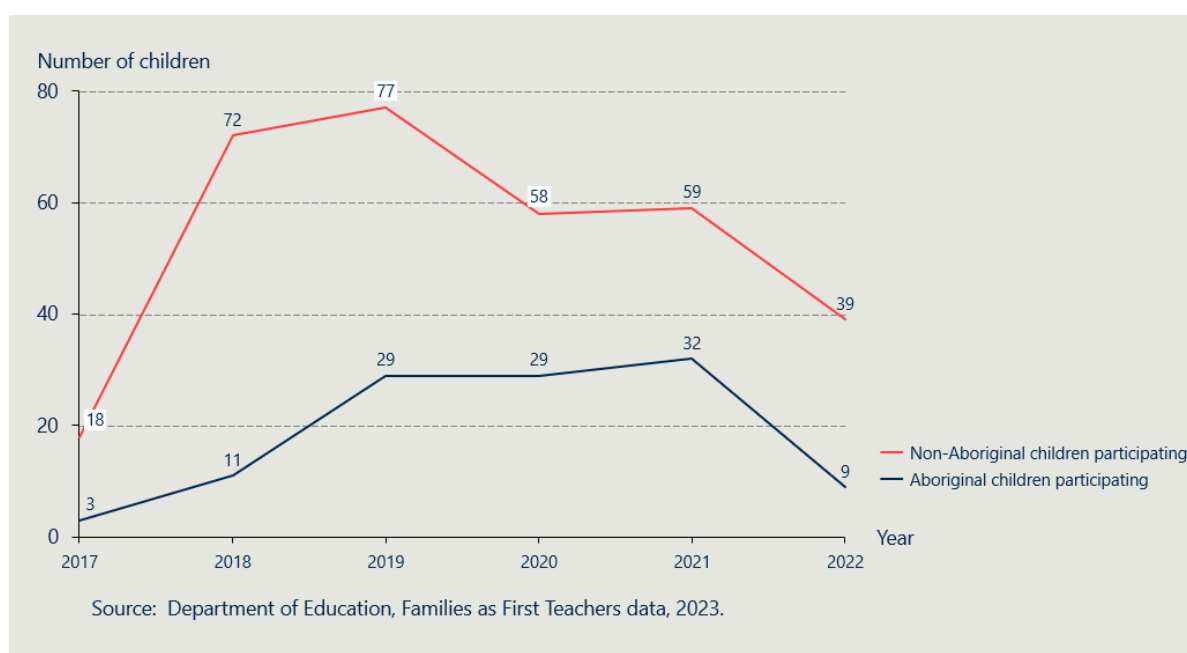
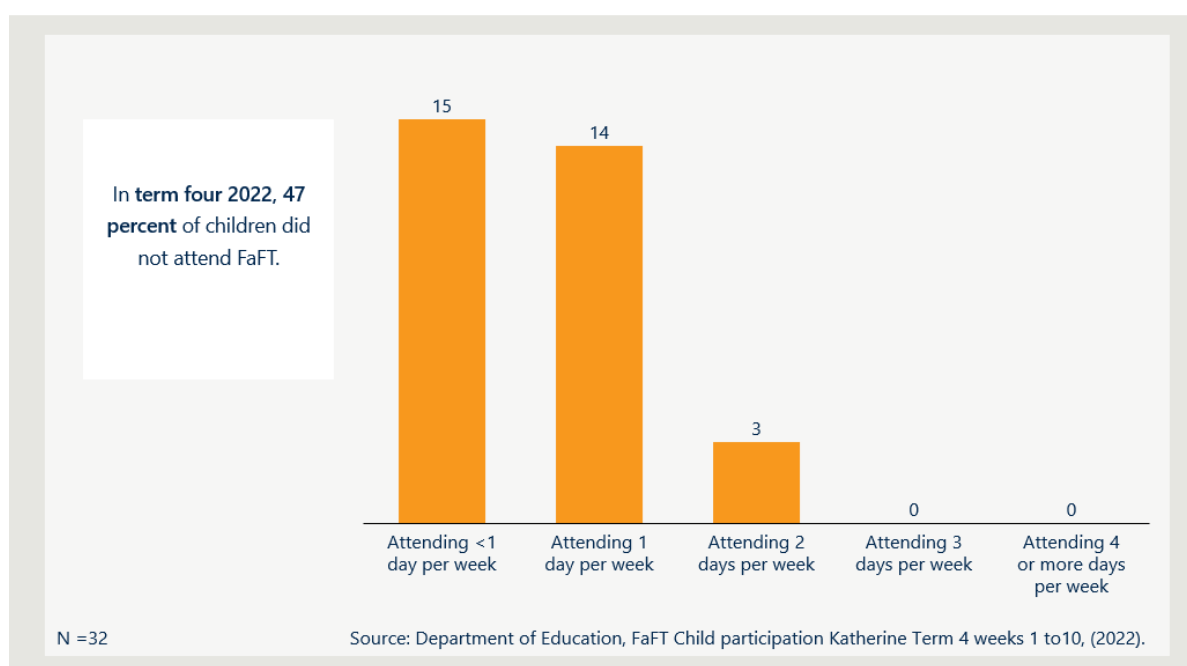


Figure 34 | Katherine FaFT average child attendance term four, 2022



Key activities at Katherine FaFT included 3a activities such as conversational reading which was facilitated by a partnership with the Book Buzz program which provided additional resources. According to the term 1 2023 Outcomes Framework report, FaFT staff make a strong effort to tailor learning games to the developmental needs of children and they provide families with feedback on children's progress. Katherine FaFT has benefited from strong partnerships with health services such as NT Hearing Services and Allied Health Services, however FaFT staff indicated a desire to build stronger partnerships with Aboriginal organisations such as the Wurli Wurlinjang Health Service.

Parents attending FaFT were consistently positive, praising the benefits of FaFT, such as its safe environment and the developmental improvements that they had noticed in their children, for example, greater emotional regulation and an improved ability to follow instructions. FaFT staff and the school principal noted that these benefits assisted children in the transition to preschool.

Enablers

Presence of a new FLO – FaFT staff and service partners collaborating with FaFT, were in firm agreement that the new FLO was helping attract more Aboriginal families to Katherine FaFT.

Strong parent capacity building focus – FaFT staff's focus on parent capacity building was aimed to help parents recognise child developmental milestones. FaFT staff maintained that this has allowed parents to become more engaged in their children's developmental journeys.

Challenges

Inclusiveness – FaFT staff, community stakeholders and collaborating service providers all consistently reported that Katherine FaFT experienced a perceived lack of inclusiveness. These stakeholders regretted that it had negatively impacted numbers of Aboriginal families. Some service partner stakeholders noted how a high proportion of non-Aboriginal children could be a contributing factor in discouraging Aboriginal families and created a greater need for cultural safety measures.

Family engagement – FaFT staff regretted that not knowing anticipated numbers for the program made it difficult to effectively plan sessions. Sometimes a lot of time and effort went into organising an activity but there was little turnout, while in other instances the numbers were too high for planned activities.

Case study: Arlparra

Contextual background of Arlparra FaFT

Population: 443

Percentage of population who are Aboriginal:
83.8 per cent

Main languages (other than English): Alyawarr,
Eastern Anmetyerr, Arrernte, Luritja

**Index of Community Socio-Educational
Advantage:** 603

Outstations: 16

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 2021

Arlparra, also known as Utopia, is a homeland community in Central Australia. FaFT was officially established in Arlparra school in 2016 under Stage 1 of the Indigenous Education Strategy.

The program has officially been running since its launch in Arlparra, however current FaFT staff noted that the program was temporarily non-operational for six months due to a lack of staff.

Key activities, outputs and outcomes

Figure 35 shows the number of children that engaged with Arlparra FaFT at least once that year from 2015 (s2) to 2022. After an initial period of growth, participation has decreased steadily from a high in 2016. The most recent decline between 2021-22 can be attributed to the six month period in which the program was not operating due to a lack of staff.

Figure 35 | Number of child participants (who attended at least once that year), 2015-2022

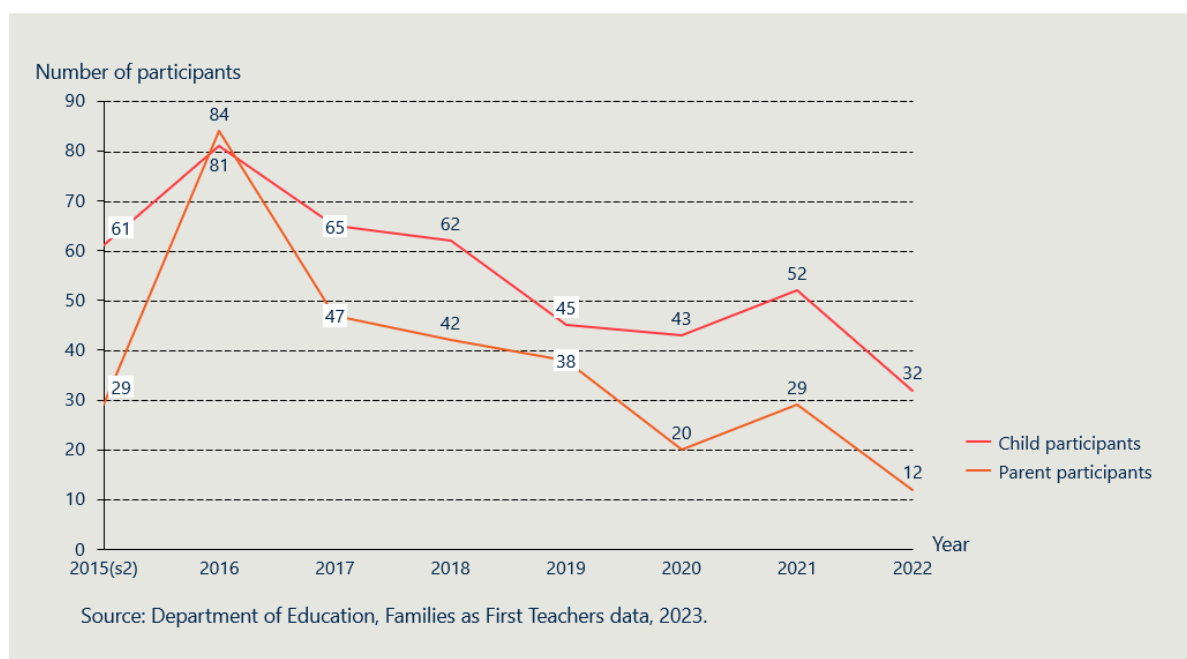
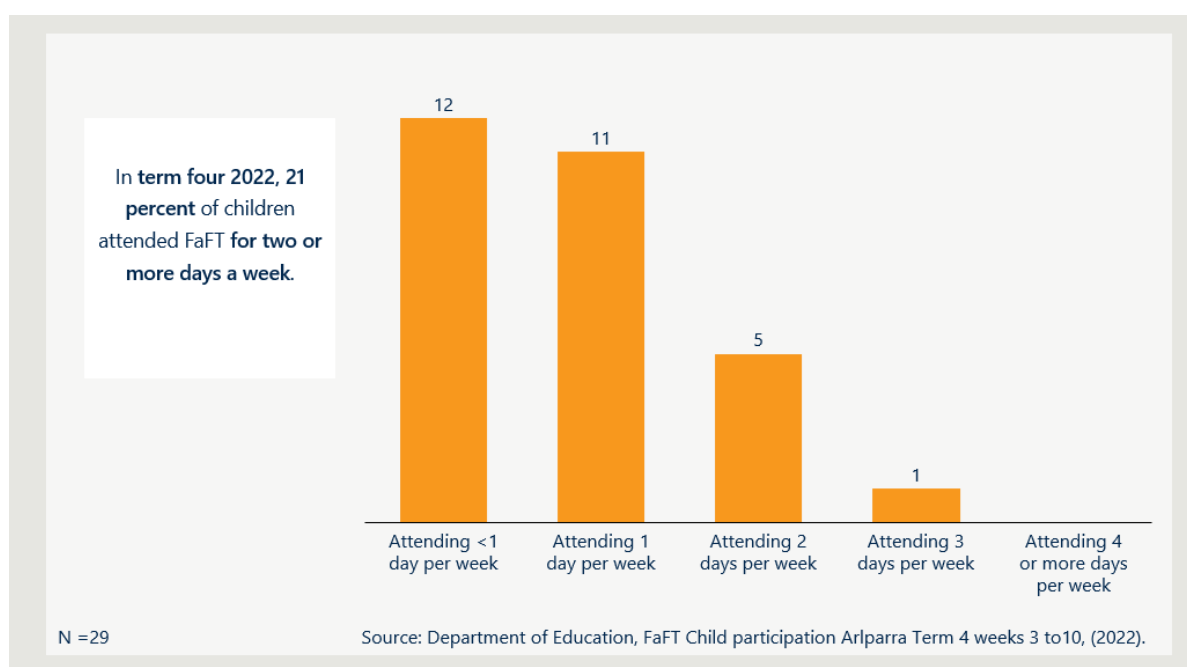


Figure 36 | Arlparra average child attendance term four, 2022



Key activities at Arlparra FaFT included 3a activities such as conversational reading and the learning games. FaFT staff reported that the families that participate in FaFT actively engage in these activities and have incorporated them in the home environment. Challenges described in the following section have limited FaFT's potential in Arlparra, resulting in fewer outreach activities, home visits and ASQ-TRAK screenings.

Enablers

Opportunities to socialise – FaFT staff noted that mothers had frequently mentioned that without FaFT they would be bored at home. According to FaFT staff parents were attracted by the social aspect of FaFT and the sense of community the program provides.

Corporate support – FE was very positive about the level of support received from corporate FaFT team. Their previously experience in the role helped Arlparra FaFT staff manage obstacles affecting the program and aid staff wellbeing.

Challenges

Community transience – the FE indicated that transience made it difficult both to retain a long term FLO and to encourage regular attendance at FaFT. The FE admitted that the lack of a FLO for an extended period of time had affected the cultural responsiveness of Arlparra FaFT and prolonged the relationship building process with the local community and consequently delaying FaFT home visits.

Staff training – At the time of the evaluation visit, the FaFT educators staff in Arlparra were not formally trained in 3a (although they have subsequently received training). The FE was able to gain a strong grasp of 3a strategies and support the new FLO in her role. However, the lack of formal FaFT training has led to some issues in program fidelity, with stakeholders reporting that they perceived an increased focus on school readiness at the site, at the expense of other areas of focus such as parent capacity building and community engagement.

Competing playgroups in the area – The Urapanga Council started its own playgroup based in some of the homelands. FaFT educators reported that this affected their numbers from those communities and

they argued that they were not going to compete as that would be working against the wishes of the local community.

Transport – In addition to issues with local infrastructure, there have also been mechanical issues with the bus which have inhibited the frequency of outreach activities to engage families in their communities.

Seasonal conditions –The Family Educator considered this the main barrier to organising on country excursions with families and bringing them into the FaFT room in Arlparra school as during the wet season, floods rendered the Sandover Highway impassable.

Case study: Jabiru

Contextual background of Jabiru FaFT

Population: 755

Percentage of population who are Aboriginal:
27.4 per cent

Main languages (other than English): Kunwinjku

**Index of Community Socio-Educational
Advantage:** 800

Outstations: 13

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 2021

Jabiru FaFT started in 2017 as a part of Stage 2 of the Indigenous Education Strategy. FaFT staff added that Jabiru was chosen as a site, due to the sudden withdrawal of Children's Ground in the area. Jabiru FaFT supports children and families across approximately 13 outstations around Jabiru, FaFT primarily services the needs of families in: Town Camp, Mudginberry and Mamakala.

Key activities, outputs and outcomes

Figure 37 shows the number of parents and children that engaged with Jabiru FaFT at least once that year from 2017 to 2022. This outlines the total coverage FaFT has had in community and there has been a notable decline between 2021 and 2022. This decline was also matched with low participation numbers in Jabiru FaFT's average child participation in term four of 2022 as seen in Figure 38.

Figure 37 | Number of child and parents engaged (who attended at least once that year), 2017-2022

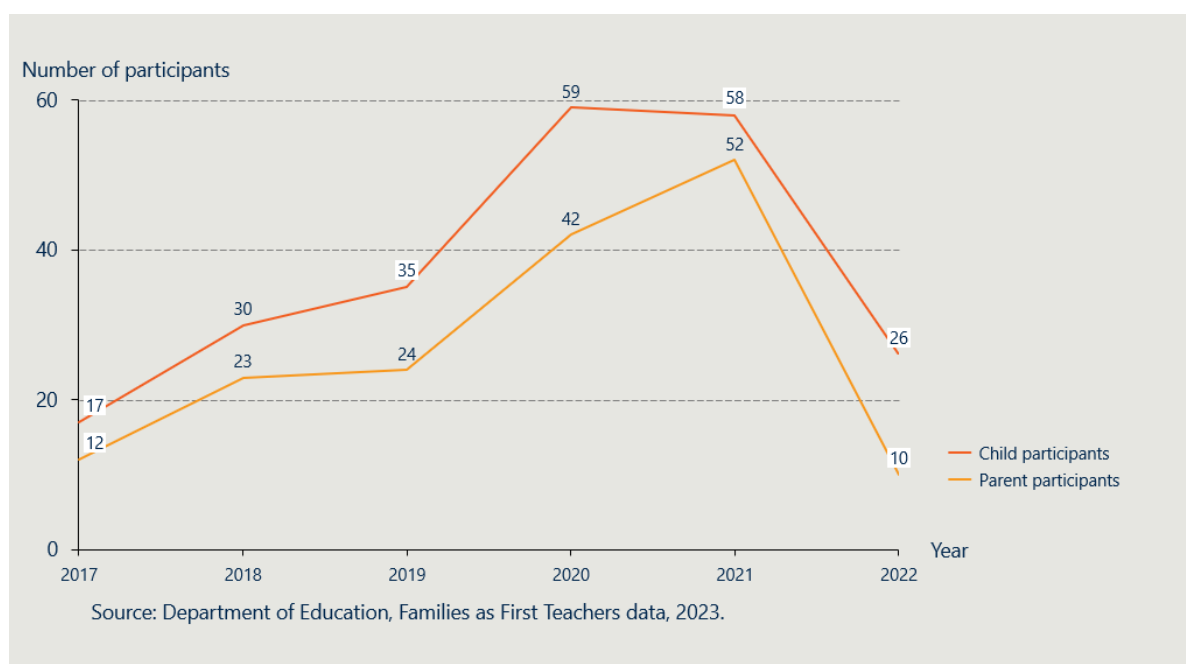
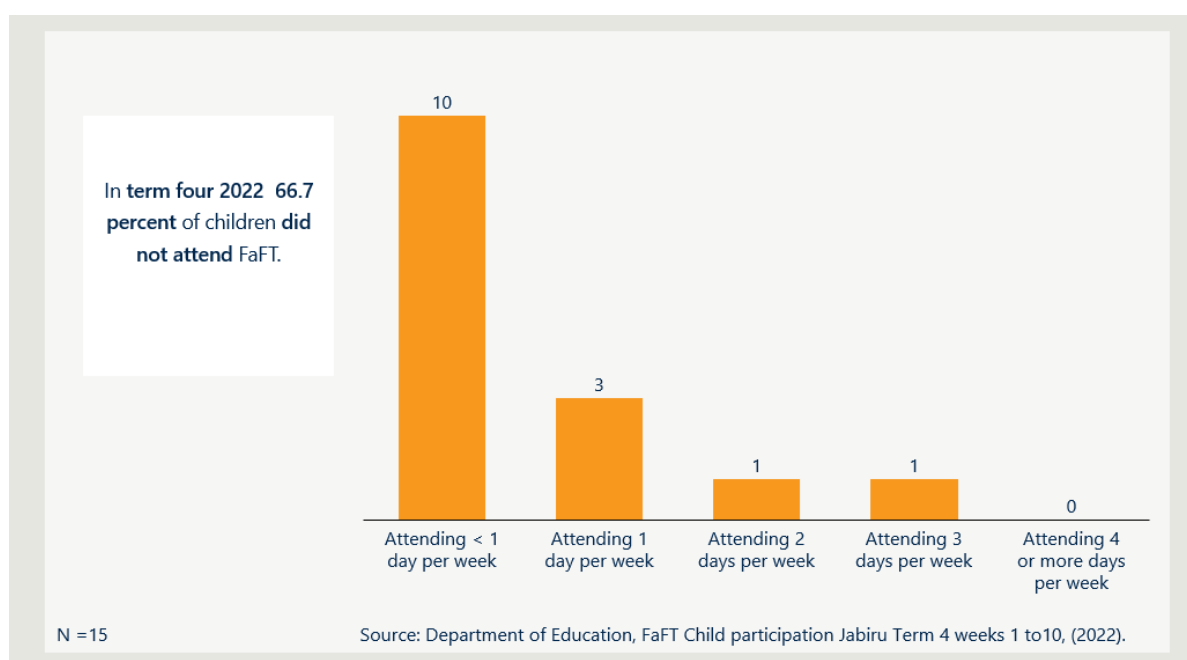


Figure 38 | Jabiru FaFT Term 4 2022 average child participation



Jabiru FaFT has a diverse grouping of service partners that collaborate with the program. These included Jabiru library, Catholic Care, ALPA, Red Lily Health and the local maternal child health nurse. Key activities at Jabiru FaFT included cultural learning on the weekly 'Learning on Country' excursion, core 3a activities such as the learning games, conversational reading and enriched caregiving. A strong positive of the implementation of Jabiru FaFT was the emphasis on parent confidence and capacity building. Jabiru FaFT's partnerships with Clontarf, ALPA and Catholic Care to assist parents in navigating administrative supports and become more confident in seeking support and interacting with government institutions. As noted in the Outcomes Framework reports, this led to some parents also finding employment at the Childcare centre, the Mercure Hotel and as rangers.

Jabiru FaFT also had more community health material (compared to other FaFT sites visited) which was accessible for families. FaFT staff noted that parents who participated regularly demonstrated both improved confidence and capacity. FaFT staff were equally positive about child development outcomes with success stories of children from difficult circumstances who had come to FaFT and subsequently thrived in preschool. An additional positive outcome of Jabiru FaFT was the educational career pathway it provided for Aboriginal students enrolled in the Jabiru Area School. As some students were able to gain valuable childcare work experience and one of them has become the residing FLO.

Enablers

Incentives – parents celebrated FaFT noting that FaFT is 'Gamak' (good). FaFT staff and Parents mentioned that food was an important incentive in attending and parents were also happy that FaFT provided many toys and books for their children that they would have not otherwise had access to.

Community input – consultations with parents confirmed Outcomes Framework reports that parents had a strong involvement in planning activities for their children. This is an important enabler as parents are more likely to attend if they will participate in activities that they have helped plan.

Challenges

Conflict between communities – FaFT staff reported that there was a significant level of community conflict between the different town camps. FaFT staff attributed this to the negative influences of the

mine such as bringing in more alcohol as well as conflict where some communities in the area who did not receive mining royalties were resentful of those who did. This led to families choosing not to attend where they wanted to avoid certain other people.

Logistical burden – the vulnerable families that Jabiru FaFT primarily seeks to target live in Jabiru’s surrounding outstations. This has turned into a logistical challenge as Jabiru FaFT only has one bus (that is shared with Jabiru Area School) and tries to pick up and drop off families who live in smaller communities in different directions. The commute to reach some of these communities is very long and the 8am start time is unrealistic. Many families do not enter the FaFT room until 11am, which has led to a lower program dosage. FaFT staff regretted that rotating the use of the bus between communities had also led to perceptions of FaFT favouritism from community stakeholders, potentially aggravating community relationships with FaFT.

Cultural appropriateness – there were no books in Kunwinjku at Jabiru FaFT, which could reflect language use in communities around Jabiru where English and Kriol are increasingly used. When FaFT conducts excursions on country, activities are in fact run in language.

Resources – FaFT staff and the assistant school principal noted how the FaFT budget was constrained and how more staff were needed to meet the program’s intended coverage.

Case study: Laynhapuy Homelands

Contextual background of Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT

Population: 462

Percentage of population who are Aboriginal:
95.5 per cent

Main languages (other than English):
Djambarrpuyngu, Dhuwal and Gumatj

**Index of Community Socio-Educational
Advantage: 578** (extremely disadvantaged)

Outstations: Approximately 30 outstations

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics data, 2021

Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT was part of the 2016 FaFT expansion and was opened in term four of 2017. The program temporarily ceased operating and reopened in term one in 2019.

Its location is very remote in North-East Arnhem Land. Many of the homelands are accessible only by air during the wet season. Yolŋu inhabitants moved in greater numbers to the homelands from the 1970s to live a more traditional lifestyle and avoid social problems in the larger settlements. In 1985 the Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation (Laynha) was established to support the homelands. Nous visited Gutjagang Homeland on Dhambaliya (Bremer) island and Dhalinybuy Homeland along the Cato River.

Key activities, outputs and outcomes

Figure 39 shows the number of children and parents that engaged with Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT at least once that year from 2019 to 2022. This data indicates that there are some issues in program fidelity as the program as FaFT across the Laynhapuy Homelands may not be emphasising the parental support aspect of the program. The average child participation was also low as seen in Figure 40, however the data may not as representative due to data entry challenges.

Figure 39 | Number of child and parent participants (who attended at least once that year), 2019-2022

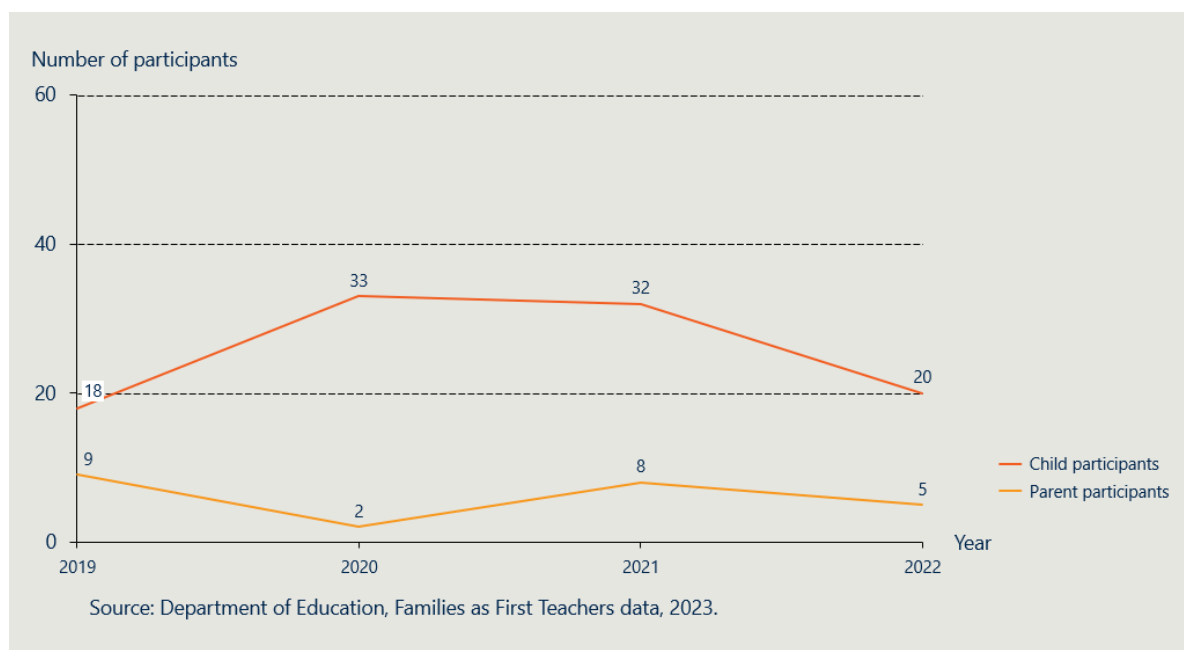
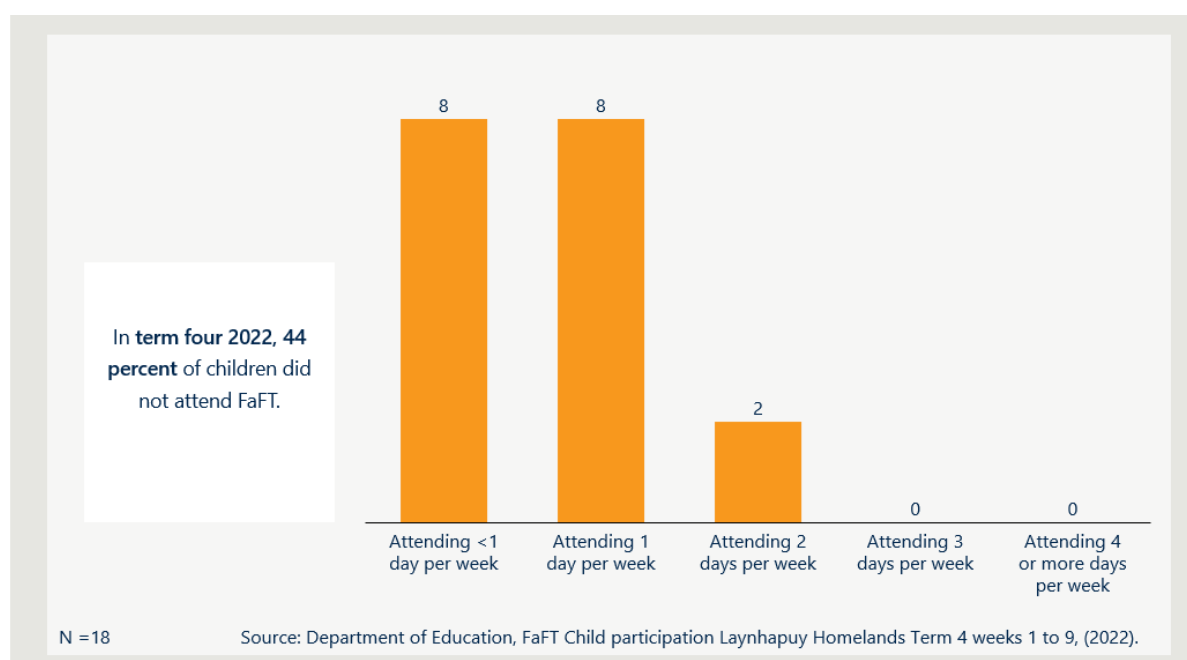


Figure 40 | Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT average child participation term four, 2022



Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT has a distinct model compared to other sites as the program is mainly run by local Aboriginal families in the homelands. The FaFT FE and FLO visit the six homelands that FaFT operates in on a weekly or fortnightly basis to provide support and materials. Where there is a very small cohort of children, FaFT staff will drop off “FaFT kits” with books in Aboriginal languages to support Home Learners (HLs) among the mums and their children. These kits included 3a related activities such as the Learning Games and books in language for conversational reading. Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT activities also emphasised local, culturally relevant activities such as cooking bushfoods like kangaroo tail and yams as well as helping mothers connect with their children in baby smoking ceremonies.

Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT primarily relies on a strong relationship with the Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation known as ‘Laynha’. The Laynhapuy Homelands are so remote, many other service providers do not cover the area due to distance and cost. Although Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT does sometimes refer high needs children to Anglicare or Miwatj and it coordinates with Yirrkala and Gunyangara FaFT to inform each other on the whereabouts of moving families. Laynha and Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT collaborate with each other primarily by:

- Information sharing of child numbers in community. This helps Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT identify children who are not enrolled in FaFT.
- Developing parent capacity building sessions that are specific to the health needs of the community. For example, when the health centre identified that children had low iron measures FaFT parent capacity building sessions prioritised nutritional learning on good sources of iron.
- Coordinating Learning on Country (LoC) outings with Laynha’s rangers.

Parents celebrated culturally responsive activities noting that these activities created a culturally safe environment. This helped them increase engagement with their children and develop their children’s sense of identity. The nature of Laynhapuy Homelands FaFT’s remoteness has also encouraged greater community ownership of the program with local mothers employed as HLs. FaFT staff also reported that children who attended consistently had visibly improved their emotional regulation and their ability to follow instructions.

Attendance across the Laynhapuy Homelands appears to be inconsistent. However, as the HLs are not coached on how to use ECPAS, the accuracy of the ECPAS data is unclear. According to Laynhapuy

Homelands FaFT's Outcomes Framework report while parents are mentored in the 3a, most of the Home Learners running the program are not formally trained in 3a or conducting ASQ-TRAK screenings. This resulted in only two children receiving ASQ-TRAK screenings between 2019-2022.

Enablers

Cultural safety – the community has a strong voice in determining how they want FaFT to work. FaFT also readily provides resources in language for families to read in the home environment.

Incentives – food is a strong incentive to attend FaFT as these communities can often experience food insecurity. Some of the homelands are very small and do not have a consistent supply of available food.

Responsive to community needs – thanks to the partnership with Laynhapuy children's health FaFT is responsive to health needs of the community.

Challenges

Administrative burden – FaFT staff considered the ECPAS data system to be very time consuming and not very practical for local mothers running the program. Staff noted that time spent training HLs and other mothers to use the system would supersede important time spent yarning and planning FaFT sessions.

Lack of staff – FaFT staff noted that more staff would be needed to provide more consistent support to the homelands that they were currently once a week or once a fortnight.

Logistical barriers – organising a FaFT program across six different homelands that are primarily accessible by air was logistically very challenging and stressful for the FE. Air travel can be delayed due to weather conditions in the wet season.

Cultural commitments – the main reason parents cited for not attending FaFT was that cultural commitments such as family hunting trips were a greater priority.

Appendix B List of FaFT sites

All current FaFT sites across the NT are shown in Table 8. In-scope sites are marked with an asterisk.

Table 8 | Current FaFT sites across the NT

Site name	Type of FaFT site	School or CFC	Region	Year established
Alekarenge (Ali Curung)*	Remote FaFT	Alekarenge School	Barkly Region	2009
Alpurrurulam*	Remote FaFT	Alpurrurulam School	Barkly Region	2016
Ampilatwatja*	Remote FaFT	Ampilatwatja School	Barkly Region	2018
Angurugu*	Remote FaFT	Angurugu School	East Arnhem Land	2009
Arlparra (Utopia)*	Remote FaFT	Arlparra School	Central Region	2016
Barunga	FaFT SPL (remote FaFT 2016-2020)	Barunga School	Big Rivers Region	2016
Belyuen	FaFT SPL	Belyuen School	Top End Region	2019
Borrooloola*	Remote FaFT	Borrooloola School	Big Rivers Region	2009
Braitling	FaFT SPL	Braitling Primary School	Central Region	2019
Canteen Creek	FaFT SPL	Canteen Creek School	Barkly Region	2020
Elliott*	Remote FaFT	Elliott School	Barkly Region	2009
Epenarra	FaFT SPL	Epenarra School	Barkly Region	2020
Galiwin'ku*	Remote FaFT	Shepherdson College	East Arnhem Land	2009
Gillen	FaFT SPL	Gillen Primary School	Central Region	2020
Gapuwiyak*	Remote FaFT	Gapuwiyak School	East Arnhem Land	2009
Gunbalanya*	Remote FaFT	Gunbalanya CFC	Top End Region	2009
Gunyangarra (Ski Beach)*	Remote FaFT	Dhupuma Barker School	East Arnhem Land	2016
Harts Range	FaFT SPL	Harts Range School	Central Region	2019
Jabiru*	Remote FaFT	Jabiru Area School	Top End Region	2017
Jilkminggan*	Remote FaFT	Jilkminggan School	Big Rivers Region	2017

Site name	Type of FaFT site	School or CFC	Region	Year established
Kalkaringi*	Remote FaFT	Kalkaringi School	Big Rivers Region	2009
Katherine FaFT*	Urban FaFT	MacFarlane Primary School	Big Rivers Region	2017
Lajamanu*	Remote FaFT	Lajamanu School	Big Rivers Region	2009
Larapinta*	Urban FaFT	Larapinta Child and Family Centre	Central Region	2017
Ludmilla*	Urban FaFT	Ludmilla Primary School	Darwin Region	2017
Malak	FaFT SPL	Malak Primary School	Darwin Region	2019
Mamaruni	FaFT SPL	Manaruni School	Top End Region	2020
Maningrida*	Remote FaFT	Maningrida CFC	Top End Region	2009
Mataranka	FaFT SPL	Mataranka School	Big Rivers Region	2017
Milikapiti*	Remote FaFT	Milikapiti School	Top End Region	2017
Milingimbi*	Remote FaFT	Milingimbi School	East Arnhem Land	2009
Mimik-ga Centre*	Urban FaFT	Wanguri Primary School	Darwin Region	2017
Minyerri*	Remote FaFT	Minyerri School	Big Rivers Region	2017
Nganmarriyanga*	Remote FaFT	Nganmarriyanga School	Big Rivers Region	2016
Ngukurr*	Remote FaFT	Ngukurr School	Big Rivers Region	2009
Ntaria (Hermansburg)*	Remote FaFT	Ntaria School	Central Region	2009
Numbulwar*	Remote FaFT	Numbulwar School	Big Rivers Region	2009
Palmerston*	Urban FaFT	Palmerston CFC	Darwin Region	2017
Papunya*	Remote FaFT	Papunya School	Central Region	2009
Peppimenarti	FaFT SPL	Peppimenarti School	Top End Region	2019
Pularumpi*	Remote FaFT	Pularumpi School	Top End Region	2017
Ramingining*	Remote FaFT	Ramingining School	East Arnhem Land	2009
Robinson River	FaFT SPL	Robinson River School	Big Rivers Region	2020
Sadadeen	FaFT SPL	Sadadeen Primary School	Central Region	2020

Site name	Type of FaFT site	School or CFC	Region	Year established
Tennant Creek*	Remote FaFT	Tennant School	Barkly region	2016
Umbakumba*	Remote FaFT	Alyarrmandumanja Umbakumba School	East Arnhem Land	2009
Urapunga	FaFT SPL	Urapunga School	Big Rivers Region	2020
Wadeye*	Remote FaFT	Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic College Warruwi School	Top End Region	2009
Warruwi*	Remote FaFT	Warruwi School	Top End Region	2017
Wugularr*	Remote FaFT	Wugularr School	Big River Region	2016
Wulungurru (Kintore)	FaFT SPL	Walungurru School	Central Region	2019
Wurrumiyanga (Nguu)*	Remote FaFT	External Provider	Top End Region	2009
Yirrkalā*	Remote FaFT	Yirrkalā School	East Arnhem Land	2009
Laynhapuy Homelands*	Remote FaFT	Laynhapuy Homelands	East Arnhem Land	2018
Yuendumu*	Remote FaFT	Yuendumu School	Central Region	2009

Appendix C Key definitions

Table 9 | Definitions of FaFT terminology

FaFT terminology	Definition
Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a)	Evidence-based pedagogical strategies which emphasise adult-child interactions to maximise children's learning outcomes. These strategies are implemented through core 3a activities including conversational reading, learning games, enriched caregiving and language priority.
AEDC developmental domains	The Australian Early Development Census monitors Australian child development progress before school. It tracks development in five different developmental domains, including: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge.
Ages and Stages Questionnaires – Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK)	Ages and Stages Questionnaire – Talking about Raising Aboriginal Kids (ASQ-TRAK) – is a developmental screening questionnaire for observing and monitoring the developmental progress of Australian Aboriginal children at two months, six months, 12 months, 18 months, 24 months, 36 months and 48 months of age. ASQ-TRAK developmental screening is only conducted in remote FaFT sites as it was a project in the Indigenous Education Strategy (NT). Urban sites have access to ASQ 3 implemented in urban child health clinics.
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model	The conceptual framework developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner used for the FaFT program. This model recognises how children's development is strongly influenced by the social and cultural environment they live in.
Children	Babies, toddlers and three to five-year-olds.
Community engagement	Reaching out to members of the community and consulting them on how FaFT should be structured and implemented to best reflect place-based needs.
Cultural safety	An inclusive policy which respects socio-cultural differences of Aboriginal people by making the program culturally/linguistically relevant and accessible.
Developmentally vulnerable on one or two domains	This refers to the AEDC summary measure of children who are vulnerable in one domain or two or more developmental domains. Children who are vulnerable in two or more domains are deemed to be at serious developmental risk.
Early childhood development	The physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development of children from birth to five years of age.
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)	ECEC is used to describe formal and informal education as well nurturing care for children from birth to age eight.

Enrolment	Enrolment in this report means when a child's family completes the necessary forms to be registered on the Department's Student Administration Management System.
FaFT educator	Anyone who works in FaFT, including family educators, family liaison officers, playgroup leaders and assistant teachers.
Family Educator (FE)	Qualified early childhood teacher who is registered with the Teacher Registration Board of the NT (TRB).
Families as First Teachers (FaFT)	Evidence-based, quality early learning and family support program that aims to improve the lifelong education, health and wellbeing outcomes for young children and their families.
Family Liaison Officer (FLO)	Local Aboriginal person with early childhood experience and relationships with local families. They are cultural mentors and context experts who provide advice and guidance in the area of cultural appropriateness of program development and delivery, in consultation with other community members.
Mobile FaFT	Mobile FaFT program delivery refers to delivering FaFT to multiple smaller communities or outstations.
Outreach program delivery	Outreach programs describe work that is conducted outside of the FaFT room but within the same community. This work can include a variety of FaFT related activities such as: • running FaFT in a local park or suburb, • organising events within the local community.
Parent	A child's father, mother or any other person who has parental responsibility for the child, including a person who is regarded as a parent of the child under Aboriginal customary law or Aboriginal tradition. The definition of parent does not include a person standing in place of the parent on a temporary basis.
Parent Capacity Building (PCB)	PCB refers to FaFT's aim of improving parent's confidence in their ability as parents. This is achieved by guiding them in the 3a strategies to apply home activities and delivering practical workshops on various topics on child development and household management.
Participation	Participation in this report follows the Department's data and defines participation levels by reference to how many days a child has attended in a given period.
School culture	Sense of belonging families share within the school.
FaFT Outcomes Framework reports	The FaFT Outcomes Framework reports are termly reports which provide a qualitative description of what activities and strategies were implemented to meet FaFT outcomes.

Appendix D Data collection methodology

This section describes the method for the evaluation, regarding:

- Data collection and analysis – the methods that were be used to collect and analyse data for the evaluation.
- Data management – how the evaluation team protected the security, privacy and confidentiality of information and ultimately how it will be disposed.
- Site selection – the selection criteria for the proposed list of sites.
- Participant inclusion criteria and recruitment processes – who was be included in consultations and how they were recruited.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection and analysis methods for the evaluation are summarised in Table 10.

Table 10 | Overview of data collection and analysis methods

Type	Data collection methods	Data analysis method
Documentation and literature	• Documentation regarding program design, history, processes, participants and sites.	• Document review
	• Literature on good practice in ECEC programs in a remote Aboriginal context.	• Literature review guided by relevant experts in ECEC
Qualitative research	• Site visits including interviews and focus groups with: • parents and carers • FaFT program staff • department staff • collaborating agencies and service providers • other relevant community members identified during site visits.	• Thematic and comparative analysis • Case studies
	• Separate interviews and focus groups with: • department staff • collaborating agencies and service providers • academic experts in ECEC and / or FaFT.	• Thematic and comparative analysis
Quantitative research	• De-identified quantitative data regarding program participants, inputs, activities and outcomes.	• Descriptive statistics

Data management

Nous' overarching information security framework

Nous has an Information Security Framework which supports the delivery of our services and safeguards clients' and research participants' data. Nous is experienced in collecting, processing and analysing data, and sharing meaningful results and reports with our clients.

Adopting a risk-based approach, Nous has implemented the following safeguards to protect high-risk / sensitive information, such as personal information, health information and / or any other information that is sensitive to the client and / or the project.

- Nous performs risk assessments on the third-party vendors of the digital tools that we use against best practices (e.g. ISO 27001, GDPR compliance, SOC 2 reports, etc) to minimise the risk of a data leak.
- All digital tools are configured with user access controls on a strictly need-to-know basis.
- Project Information Risk Assessments (PIRAs) provide an auditable trail for each project on how any personal or client sensitive information was collected, stored, processed, shared, archived and/or destroyed on that project. PIRAs identify what types of personal or client sensitive information were involved in the project, which IT applications were used on the project, and if a subcontractor may have handled personal or client sensitive information during the project.
- Confidentiality clauses are included in subcontractor contracts. Where they handle personal or client sensitive information, an additional security risk assessment is performed, and additional appropriate safeguards are applied. This may include requiring their use of Nous managed IT equipment, establishing a temporary Nous user account for the duration of the project, and seeking client approval before enabling their access to any sensitive information.

Data and information security arrangements

The evaluation team implemented the following measures to ensure that all data was stored securely and confidentially:

- All data collected through the evaluation was stored in secure project workspaces (including password-only access to online material and locked storage of hardcopy project information) with role-based access rights. Only evaluation team-members were able to access data stored in these workspaces.
- All electronic information resided in a secure Australian data centre on a SharePoint server hosted on private cloud infrastructure managed by a reputable Australian services provider. The Principal Investigator (Robert Sale) was responsible for data management on this combined repository. External network access was secured and monitored via a managed firewall.
- Document management and collaboration systems were hosted on a secure private cloud hosted in Australia.
- Receipt of key documents and datasets were tracked in a central register.

Information retention and disposal

The evaluation team implemented the following information retention and disposal procedures:

- Any participant details provided during the consultations were destroyed / erased once consultations were completed.
- Any information required for long-term project records according to the evaluation contract, legislation and / or the HREC will be destroyed five years after project completion.
- Any information not required for long-term project records will be destroyed upon project completion.
- Information to be destroyed will be erased (for digital information) or securely and irreversibly disposed of (for hard copy information).

This will allow the evaluation team to review the data should the Department have questions about any aspect of the evaluation report. The evaluation team members will not use the data in future for any other purpose. Nous is commissioned to conduct the evaluation in the set period only, and the contract with Department does not include permission to use the data for secondary purposes.

Privacy protection of personal information

All information collected directly from individual participants was anonymised and synthesised with information received from other participants and presented as aggregated views in the evaluation reports. Where quotes from individual interviews, case studies or anecdotes are used to illustrate key findings, these were de-identified. We used data in such a way that a person could not be identified from what is included in any final publications or disseminated documents.

Site selection

Visits were conducted to 12 of the 55 current FaFT sites as part of the evaluation.

The sample of sites will be selected in such a way as to ensure a mixture of:

- urban, remote and very remote sites
- regions of the NT
- original and subsequent FaFT sites
- sites perceived by the Department to be performing well and less well.
- The list of sites included:
 - Arlparra
 - Jabiru
 - Gunbalanya
 - Galiwinku
 - Katherine
 - Larapinta
 - Laynhapuy Homelands
 - Maningrida
 - Mimik-ga Centre
 - Ntaria

- Palmerston
- Yirrkala.

Other consultations were held via Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) or in person in Darwin. These included interviews with academics and senior Department of Education and Training employees.

Participant inclusion criteria and recruitment processes

Individuals were eligible for inclusion if they were:

- involved in FaFT as parents, carers, educators, community members, collaborating service providers, Department staff or academics
- aged 18 years of age or more.

Individuals were excluded from recruitment if they were:

- not involved in FaFT as parents, carers, educators, community members, collaborating service providers, Department staff or academics
- aged under 18 years of age
- not fit to give consent (e.g. due to an intellectual disability).

The recruitment process for participants followed:

For pre-identified stakeholders to be consulted during site visits

1. The Department of Education and Training sent an initial email to FaFT school principals at selected sites to make them aware of the evaluation. This email included a request for principals to identify key stakeholders who should be consulted as part of the review.

Principals shared the brochure and participant information sheet with the identified stakeholders.

The evaluation team contacted the stakeholders who were identified ahead of site visits via email or telephone to confirm when we would visit.

When on site, the evaluation team followed up with each stakeholder to arrange a consultation.

Prior to each consultation, a member of the evaluation team provided each participant with a participant information sheet and a consent form to sign. Consent was sought after explaining the information in the participant information sheet and consent form.

Additional stakeholders identified during site visits

The initial email to school principals (described above) included a poster for them to put up in their schools to make parents and other stakeholders aware of the upcoming evaluation visit, including dates and location of informal lunch-time drop-in sessions at which food will be provided.

Aboriginal community researchers used their networks to spread awareness of the drop-in sessions.

At each consultation, we asked participants if they knew of any other relevant stakeholders within the community who we should consult.

Prior to each consultation, a member of the evaluation team provided each participant with a participant information sheet and a consent form to sign.

Other stakeholders

For stakeholders to be consulted outside of site visits (via MS Teams or in person in Darwin), we sent an initial email inviting them to participate and sent the brochure and participant information sheet as attachments.

Prior to each consultation, a member of the evaluation team provided each participant with a participant information sheet and a consent form to sign.

Appendix E Evaluation questions

The evaluation questions are shown in Table 11 below.

Table 11 | Evaluation questions

Primary question	Secondary questions	
Appropriateness: How appropriate was the design of FaFT?	What needs does FaFT aim to address and for whom?	• In what locations does FaFT operate? • What individuals and families in these locations does FaFT cater to? • What specific needs of individuals, families and / or communities does FaFT seek to address?
	How does FaFT seek to address these needs for these cohorts?	• What is the program logic for FaFT? i.e. What are the intended: 1. inputs 2. activities and outputs 3. short, medium and long-term outcomes 4. underpinning assumptions and causal mechanisms. • What adjustments have been made to FaFT in each location to better address place-based needs? • What changes have been made to FaFT over time to better address participant needs?
	In what ways is the FaFT program design appropriate to address these needs for these cohorts?	• What is the theory of change for FaFT's intended outcomes? i.e. What factors contribute to the outcomes according to: 1. academic and grey literature 2. family and community members 3. FaFT staff-members and collaborating service providers 4. policy makers. • What aspects of the program logic for FaFT align with the theory of change? Which, if any, do not? • What are the perspectives of different stakeholders on the appropriateness of the FaFT program design?
	In what ways does FaFT ensure cultural safety and community accountability?	• How does FaFT seek to ensure cultural safety at the individual, community, and whole-of-program levels? • How does FaFT seek to ensure accountability and responsiveness to the communities in which it operates?
Processes: How well was FaFT implemented?	What was the intended implementation process for FaFT?	• What activities were planned to support the implementation of FaFT? e.g. training, communication, monitoring and evaluation • How were different stakeholders intended to be involved

Primary question	Secondary questions	
		in the implementation of FaFT?
	How was FaFT implemented in practice, and how, if at all, did this differ from what was intended?	• What activities occurred to support the implementation of FaFT in practice? • How did different stakeholders contribute to the implementation of FaFT in practice? • How, if at all, did these activities and stakeholder roles differ from what was envisaged? Why? • Was program rollout completed on time and within the intended budget? Why or why not?
	Did FaFT meet expected levels of reach, coverage and quality? Why or why not?	• Is FaFT operating in all planned locations? • Is FaFT catering to the expected numbers and groups of participants in these locations? • Is FaFT offering the intended mix and quality of supports in these locations?
	What were the enablers and barriers for implementation?	• What factors facilitated the implementation of FaFT? • What factors impeded the implementation of FaFT?
Outcomes: What aspects of FaFT worked for whom and in what contexts and modes?	What were the outcomes of FaFT?	• What intended outcomes of FaFT were achieved? • What, if any, intended outcomes of FaFT were not achieved? • What, if any, were the unintended outcomes (positive or negative) of FaFT?
	What were the causal mechanisms for the outcomes of FaFT?	• What were the processes or contributing factors for the observed outcomes of FaFT? • Where intended outcomes of FaFT were not achieved, why was this?
	What were the conditions for success for FaFT?	• Where FaFT was successful, what characteristics of the program, its participants, or operating context enabled this? • Where FaFT was less successful, what characteristics of the program, its participants, or operating context contributed to this?
Improvements: How can FaFT be improved?	How can the design of FaFT be improved?	
	How can the implementation of FaFT be improved?	
	How can the outcomes of FaFT be improved (e.g. by enhancing positive outcomes or mitigating negative outcomes)?	
	Are there changes that can be made external to the FaFT program to improve outcomes for the target cohort?	

Appendix F Stakeholder consultation guides

Consultation/yarning guide for staff

Target Audience	• FaFT staff • Departmental staff • Collaborating agencies and service Providers
Objectives	• Understand both the ways that FaFT is being delivered as well as the outcomes / impacts of the program.
Approach	• Before an interview is conducted, the evaluation team will provide overview of the evaluation, allow the participant to review the Participant Information Sheet and complete the Participant Consent Form. • This interview guide is designed to inform 1:1 and small group interviews. • Interviews will take around one hour, however they may take less than this (e.g. if the participant has limited availability).

Topics and questions

1. Introductions and Purpose of Engagement

- a) Could you please tell us about your role or involvement with FaFT?
e.g. responsibilities, typical day / week, priority activities, length of time involved with FaFT program, reasons for choosing to work in the FaFT program

2. Appropriateness

- a) In what ways is the FaFT program design appropriate to meet the needs of its target cohorts? *e.g. parent and community engagement, special activities, school location, program values, governance)?*
- b) In what ways does FaFT meet the unique needs of the community here in this location?
e.g. place-based needs, local issues,
- c) Do you know of any community members who choose not to participate in FaFT? If so, why is this?
e.g. program or school factors, cultural factors, social factors, apathy, mobility, parents

3. Processes

- a) What have been the enablers for the program?
e.g. workforce, cultural safety, program leadership, monitoring and evaluation, staff / children / families understanding and engagement with the program, operating context/environment
- b) What have been the key challenges and barriers for the program? How were these addressed, or how could they be?
e.g. applying FaFT model as intended, engaging young people / families, operating context)?
- c) What strategies and outreach activities does the program use to engage families?
e.g. Home visits
- d) How has the FaFT program changed since it was introduced in this location and why?
e.g. overcoming barriers, adjusting to local needs
- e) What supports did staff receive to feel confident and qualified in delivering the program? Are any further supports required?
e.g. financial, social, structural, human, training, qualifications of Aboriginal staff and consequences

Topics and questions

for design and delivery

- f) How are parents applying what they learn at FaFT at home?
e.g. conversational reading, learning games, barriers to applying learning in the home environment?

4. Outcomes

- a) What have been the benefits of FaFT for children, parents or the community?
e.g. positive outcomes and stories, student success, improved engagement in learning activities, parents' engagement, improved motivation, increased community connections and friendships.
- b) What unintended consequences, positive or negative, have been observed for children, families, and communities where FaFT is delivered?

5. Future Improvements

- a) How can the FaFT program improve?
e.g. address gaps, better meet needs and encourage outcomes of young people, grow engagement with families, children and communities, improvements in learning and retention, policy, funding, programs, staff, leaders, governance
- b) What would you like the program at your location to look like in 5 years' time?
- c) Are there changes that can be made external to the FaFT program to improve outcomes for the target cohort?

6. Wrap up and Closing Remarks

- a) Do you have any final comments or questions?

Consultation/yarning guide for families and community members

Target Audience	Parents, families and community members
Objectives	Understand both the ways that FaFT is being delivered as well as the outcomes / impacts of the program.
Approach	Before interview is conducted the evaluation team will provide overview of the evaluation, allow the participant to review the Participant Information Sheet and complete the Participant Consent Form. This interview guide is designed to inform 1:1 and small group interviews. Interviews will take around one hour, however they may take less than this (e.g. if the participant has limited availability).

Topics and questions

1. Introductions and Purpose of Engagement

- a) Could you please tell us about your involvement with FaFT?
e.g. length of time involved with FaFT program, number of kids involved in the program

2. Appropriateness

- a) Why did you first come along to FaFT? What about FaFT appealed to you?

Topics and questions

e.g. parent and community engagement, impacts on student learning and outcomes, special activities, school location, program values, cultural safety, governance

- b) In what ways does FaFT meet the unique needs of you and your family and community here in this location?

e.g. place-based needs, local issues

- c) Do you have any friends and or family members who don't go to FaFT? If so, why is this?

e.g. program or school factors, cultural factors, social factors, apathy, mobility

3. Process

- a) What does FaFT do well?

e.g. program staff, meeting community expectations, culturally safe, give you appropriate information where needed

- b) How has FaFT changed since it was introduced in this location and why?

e.g. overcome barriers, adjust to local needs

- c) How confident are you to use what you learn at FaFT at home?

e.g. conversational reading, learning games and barriers to using 3a in the home environment

4. Outcomes

- a) How has FaFT benefited you, your child or your community?

e.g. positive outcomes and stories, student success, improved engagement in learning activities, parents' engagement, improved motivation, increased community connections and friendships

- b) Have there been any drawbacks or downsides of FaFT for you or for your child?

5. Future Improvements

- a) How can FaFT improve?

e.g. address gaps, better meet needs and encourage outcomes of young people, grow engagement with families, children and communities, improvements in learning and retention, policy, funding, programs, staff, leaders, governance

- b) What would you like the program at your location to look like in 5 years' time?

- c) Are there changes that can be made external to the FaFT program to improve outcomes for children?

6. Wrap up and Closing Remarks

- a) Do you have any final comments or questions?

Focus group guide for Family Liaison Officers (FLOs).

Topic (project)	FaFT evaluation
Objectives	1 Test findings from previous consultations 2 Seek FLOs' input on the evaluation questions (e.g. enablers, barriers, improvements) 3 Develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of the FLO 4 Determine how the role of the FLO could be better supported

Background

The NT Department of Education and Training (the Department) has engaged Nous Group and Batchelor Institute to evaluate Families as First Teachers (FaFT). This is an important opportunity to improve the program and inform its future.

The evaluation aims to answer four main questions:

Appropriateness: How appropriate was the design of FaFT?

Processes: How well was FaFT implemented?

Outcomes: What aspects of FaFT worked for whom and in what modes and contexts?

Improvements: How can FaFT be improved?

We are keen to hear more from FLOs about their views on FaFT.

This focus group will take one hour or less.

We won't tell the Department or anyone else anything you specifically say.

If you have any questions about the evaluation or this focus group, please let us know at any time – now or later.

Questions

Your role as a FLO

Can you tell us about your work with FaFT?

- Prompts: How did you first get involved with FaFT? When did you start as a FLO? Are you full or part time?

How do you spend your time as a FLO?

- Prompts: What are the key activities you do at FaFT each day? What do you do outside of normal FaFT hours (e.g. community engagement)? Do you help the FE to set up the space and plan lessons? Do you yarn with families about what they want from FaFT?

What training and support have you had to become a FLO?

- Prompts: 3a certification, ASQ-TRAK training, TAFE certificates in childcare

What would help you more in your job?

- Prompts: Is your job flexible enough? Would you like more or less hours? Do you get enough support from FE/corporate team/school principal?

Are you financially better off because of FaFT?

- Prompts: What job were you doing before you were a FLO? Are there other jobs available in your community?

FaFT in your community

Does FaFT work well for kids and parents in your community?

- Prompts: children's learning and development outcomes, transition to preschool, sense of identity; parents' capacity and confidence; community needs met

What helps you engage families with FaFT?

- Prompts: outreach, home visits, personal relationships, cultural activities, knowledge of local languages, understanding of local community dynamics, incentives such as food and awards

What makes it hard to engage families with FaFT?

- Prompts: transport issues, community conflict, poor relationships, families moving around, early morning starts, parents not seeing a need for FaFT, parents not knowing or trusting the people who run FaFT, not enough resources to cover the whole community

Do you think FaFT is culturally safe?

- Is FaFT run in local language? Are there culturally relevant activities/excursions? Are there enough books/materials in local language?

What would make FaFT better?

- Prompts: early learning, parenting support, cultural safety, start and finish times, community input, transport, outreach

Appendix G Survey text and analysis

Nous conducted a survey of current FaFT staff and school principals. There were 52 responses: 29 FEs, 16 principals and 7 FLOs. 80 per cent of responses were from staff at remote FaFT sites, while 20 per cent were from urban staff. The quantitative responses are contained in the following diagrams. Free text responses have been excluded here to preserve anonymity, but were considered as part of the evaluation's qualitative analysis.

Figure 41 | Nous staff survey question on appropriateness of design

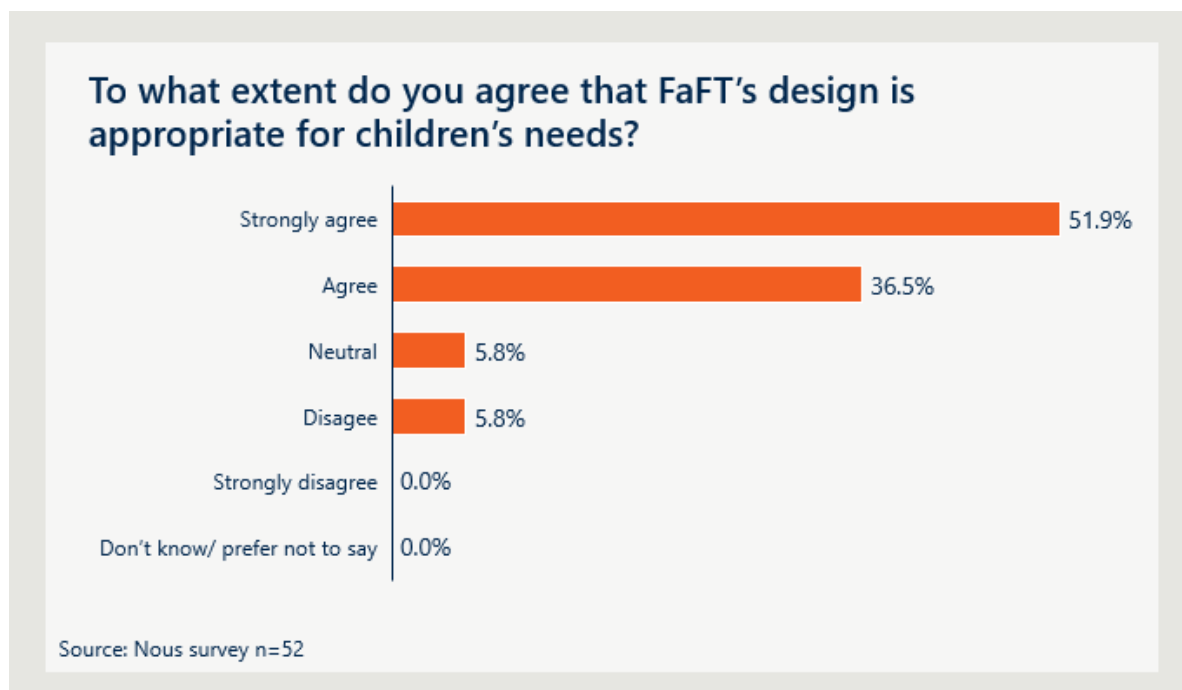


Figure 42 | Nous staff survey question on appropriateness of design

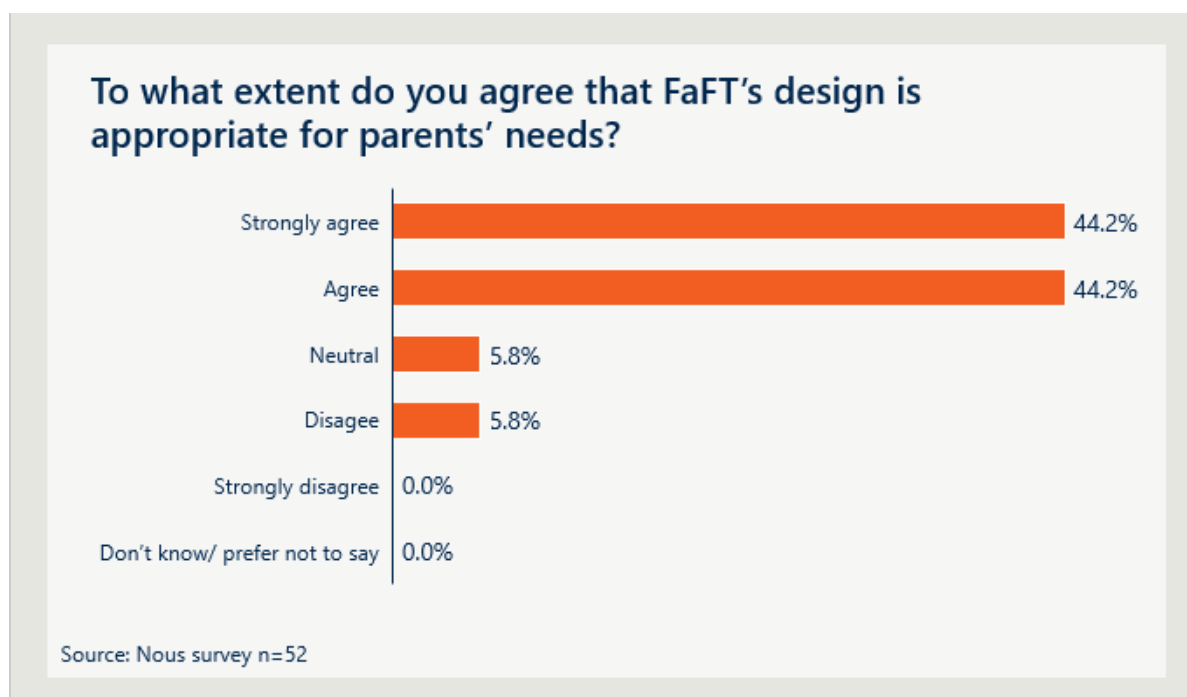


Figure 43 | Nous staff survey question on appropriateness of design

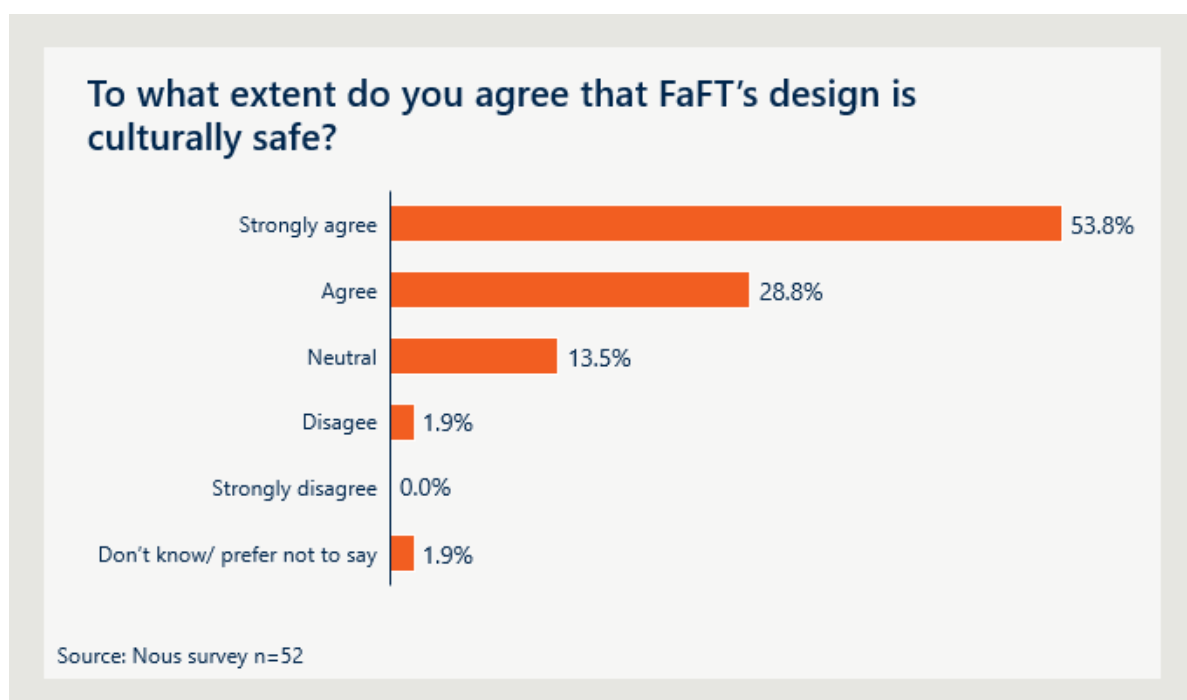


Figure 44 | Nous staff survey question on the appropriateness of design

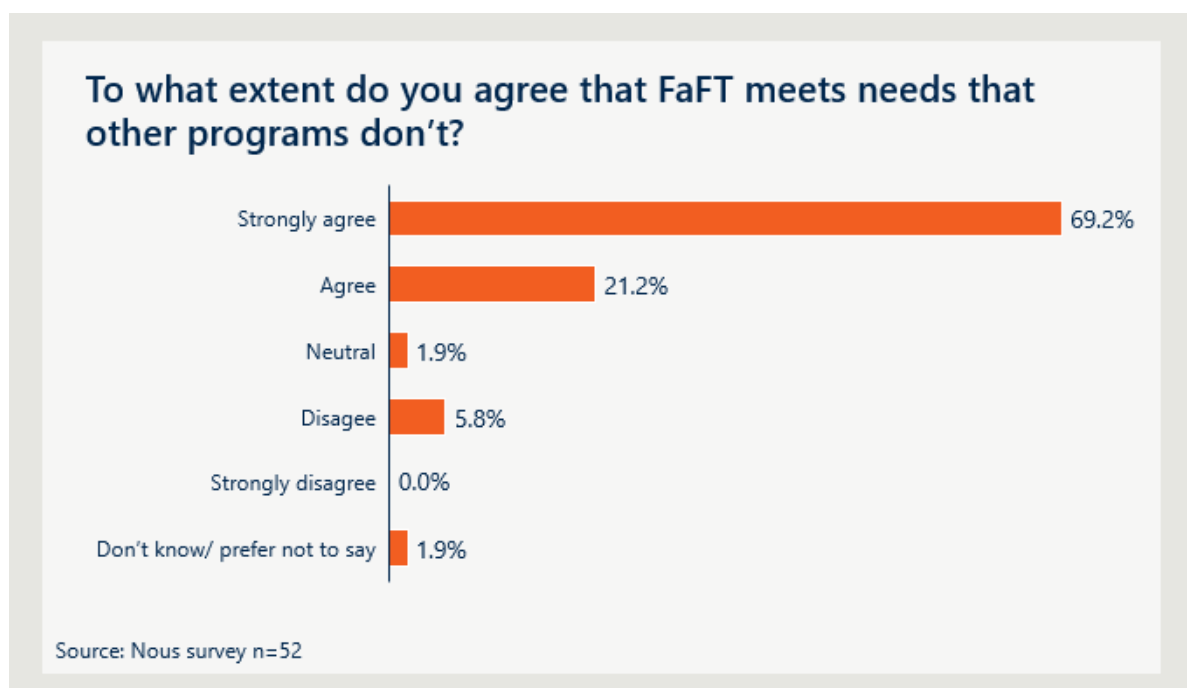


Figure 45 | Nous staff survey question on program implementation

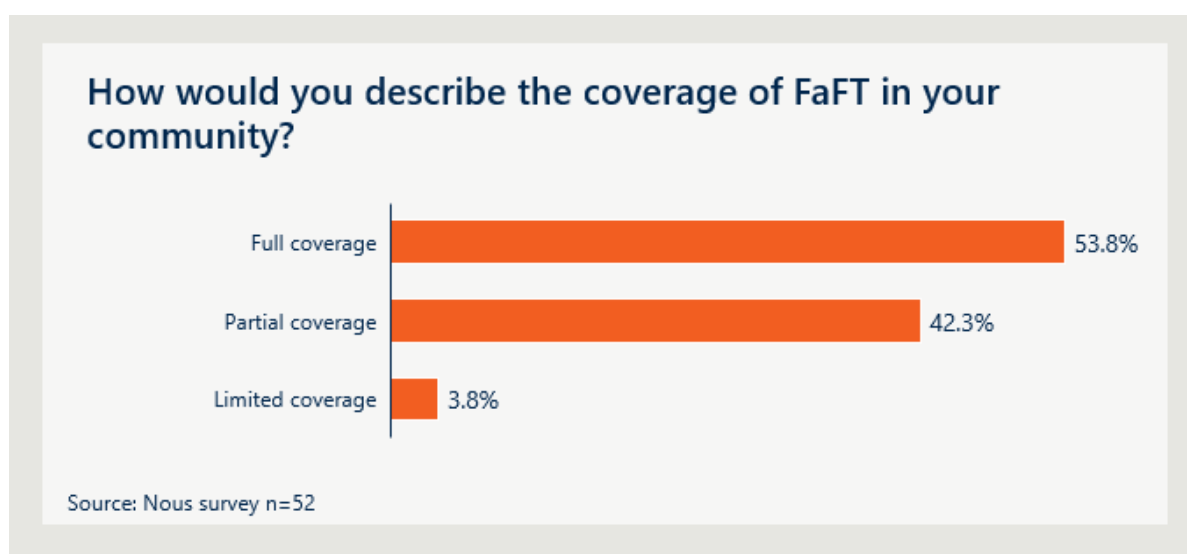
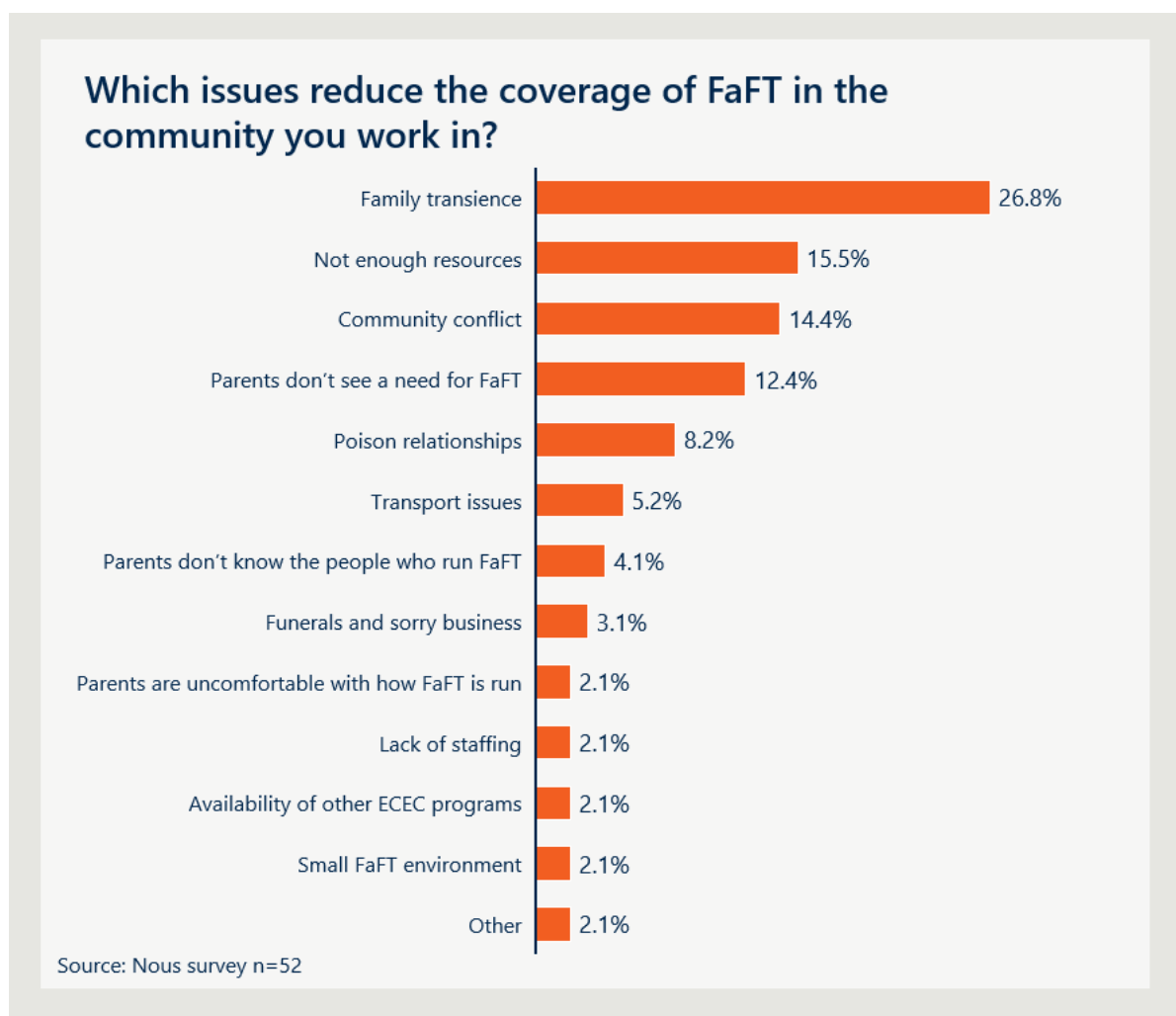


Figure 46 | Nous staff survey question on program implementation⁸⁴



⁸⁴ Insert the footnote for the other categories

Figure 47 | Nous staff survey question on program implementation

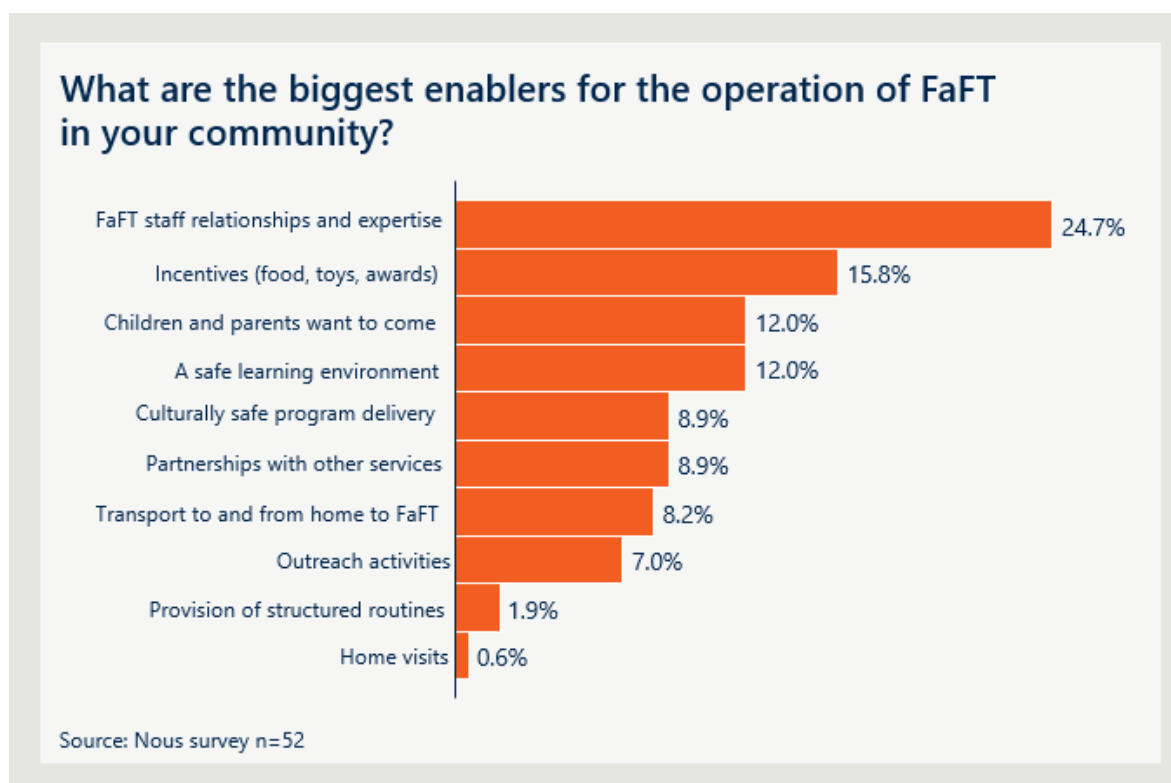
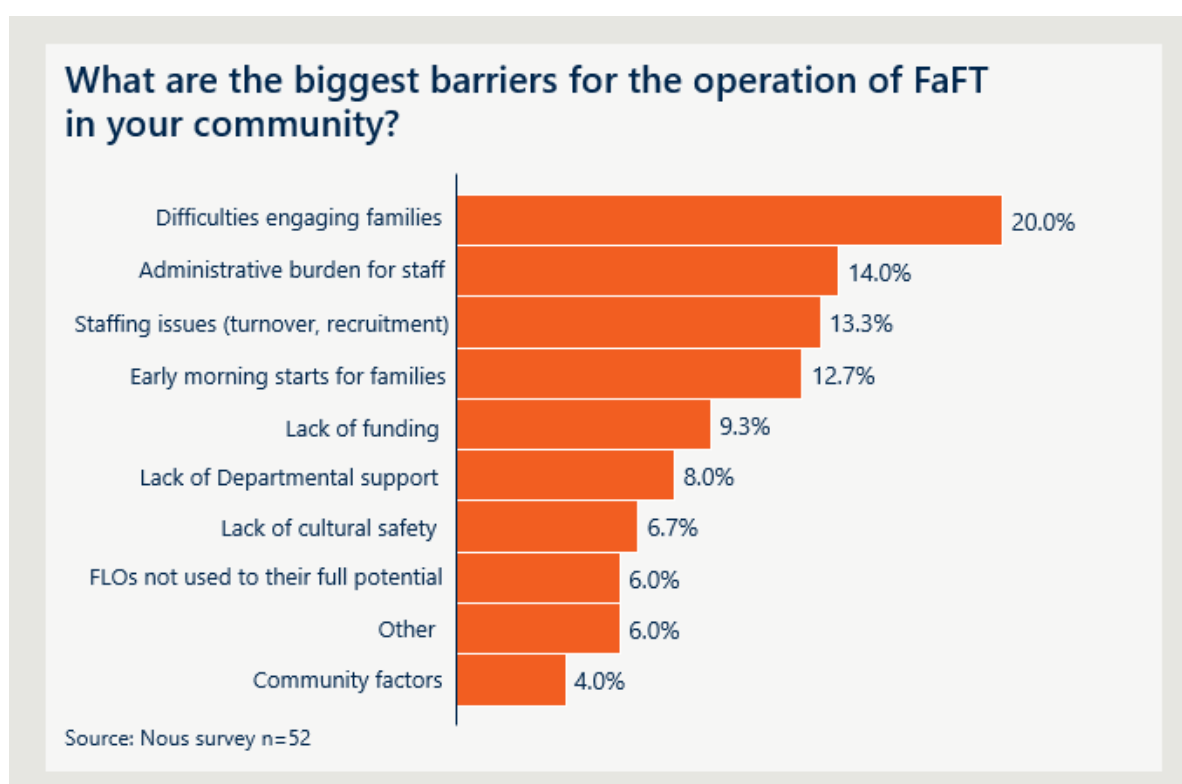


Figure 48 | Nous staff survey question on program implementation⁸⁵



⁸⁵ Other includes parents going to work and issues associated with FaFT environment (capacity / lack of toilets).

Figure 49 | Nous staff survey question on program outcomes

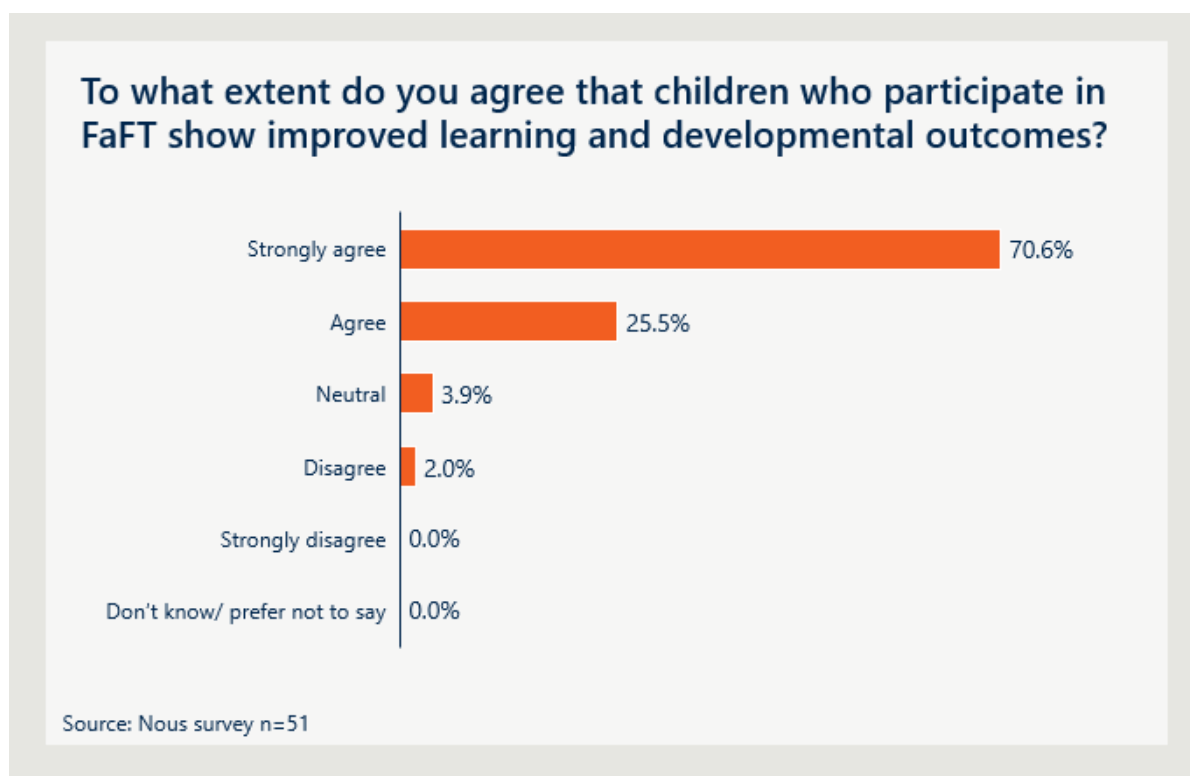


Figure 50 | Nous staff survey question on program outcomes

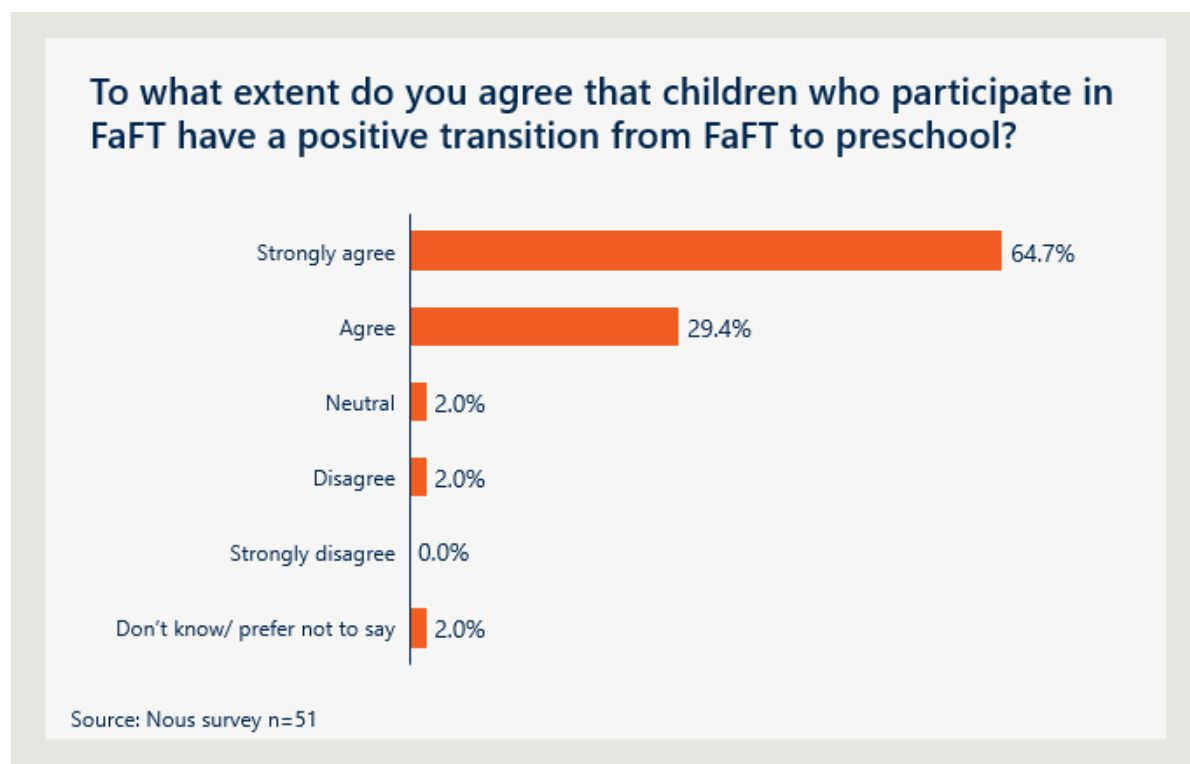


Figure 51 | Nous staff survey question on program outcomes

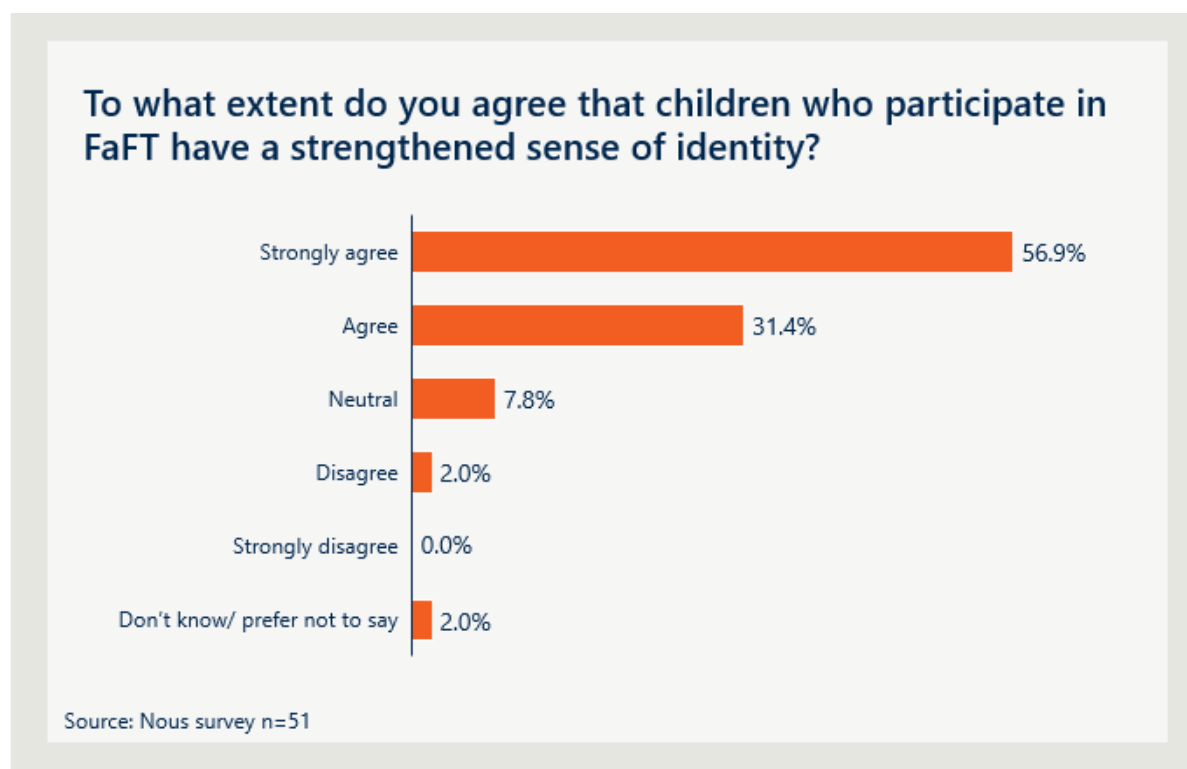


Figure 52 | Nous staff survey question on program outcomes

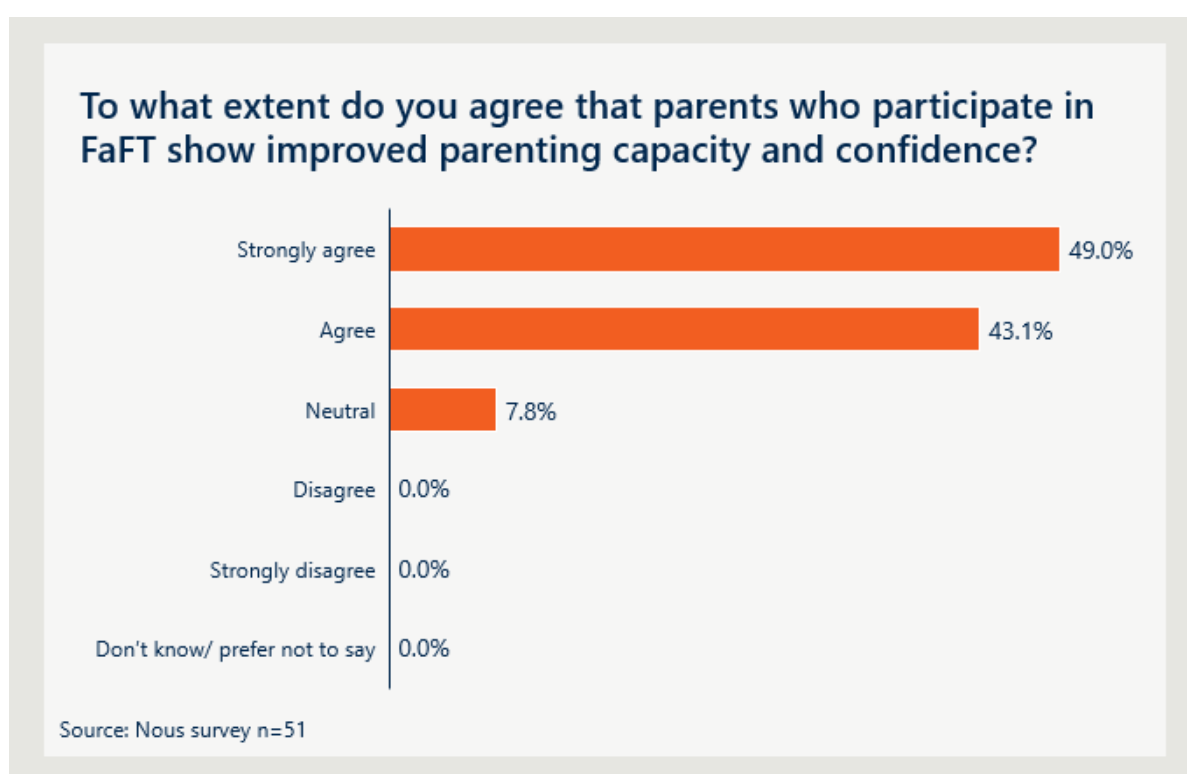


Figure 53 | Nous staff survey question on program outcomes

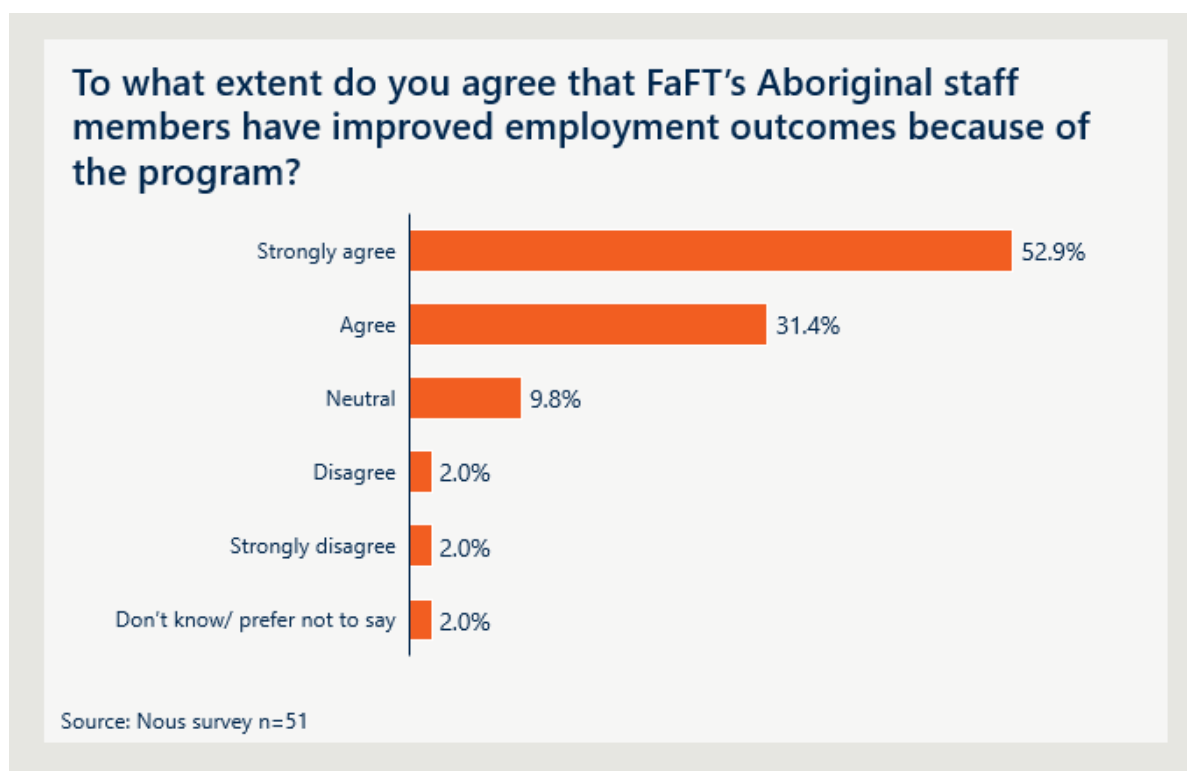
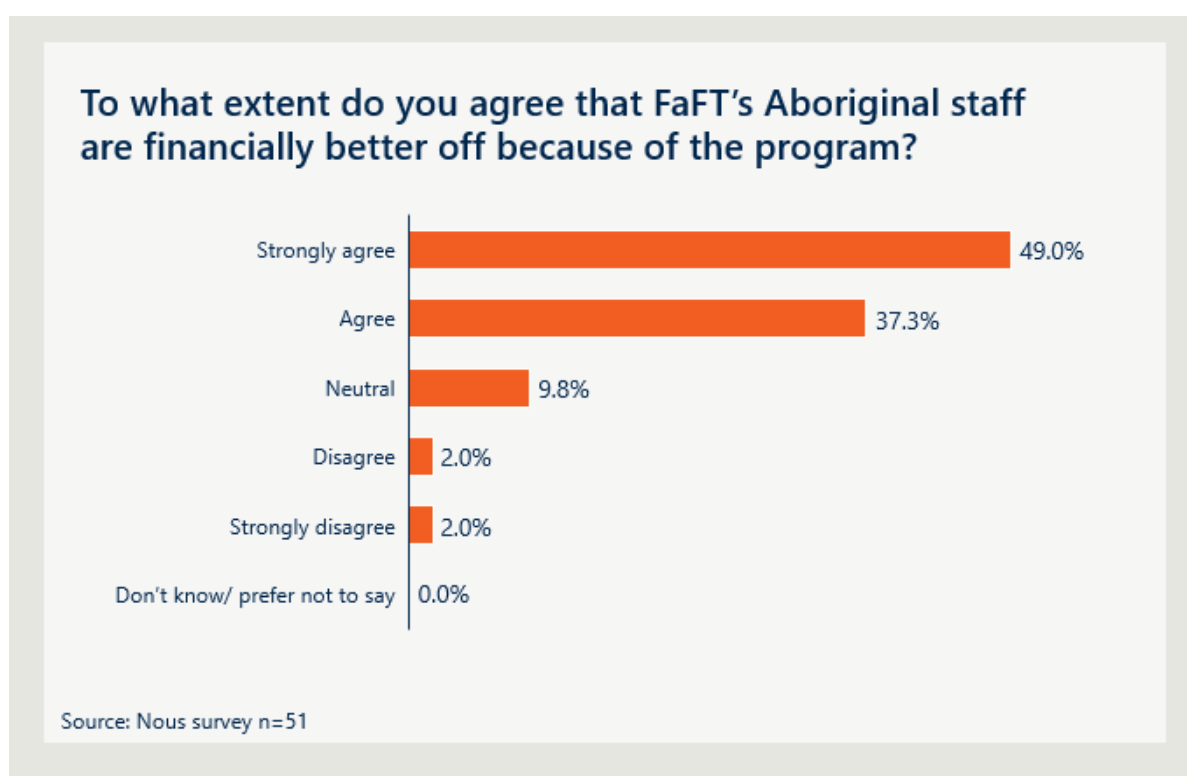


Figure 54 | Nous staff survey question on program outcomes



Appendix H Quantitative analysis

This appendix presents additional quantitative analysis of data on FaFT's participants, activities, outputs and short-term outcomes.

H.1 Child participation

Figure 55 | Number of child participants by site, Barkly region, 2015-2023

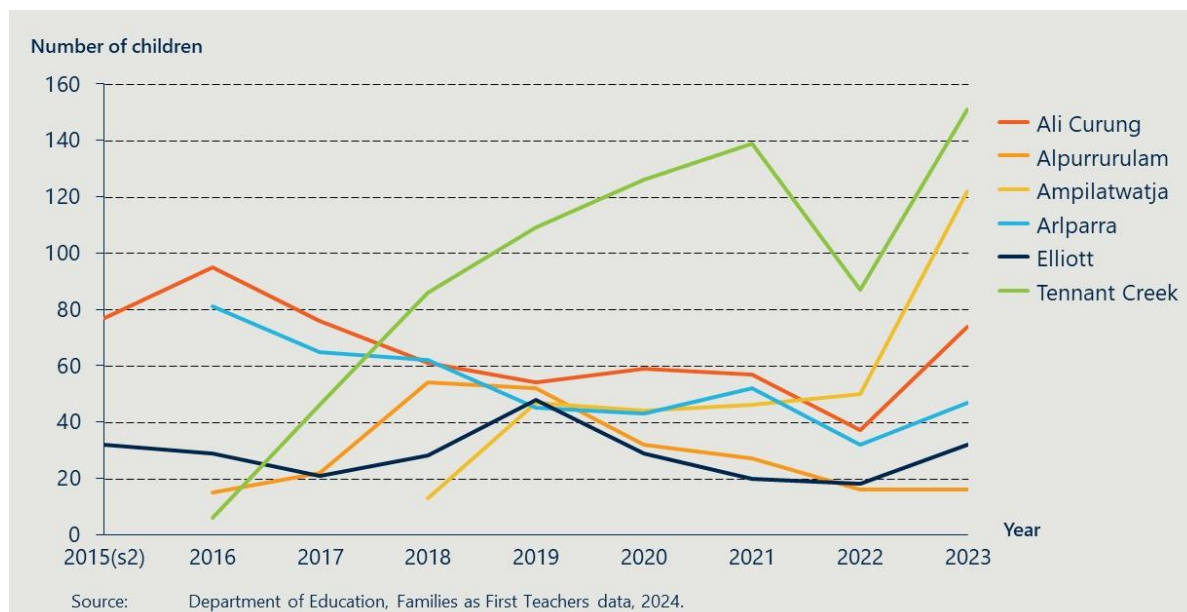


Figure 56 | Number of child participants by site, Big Rivers region, 2015-2023

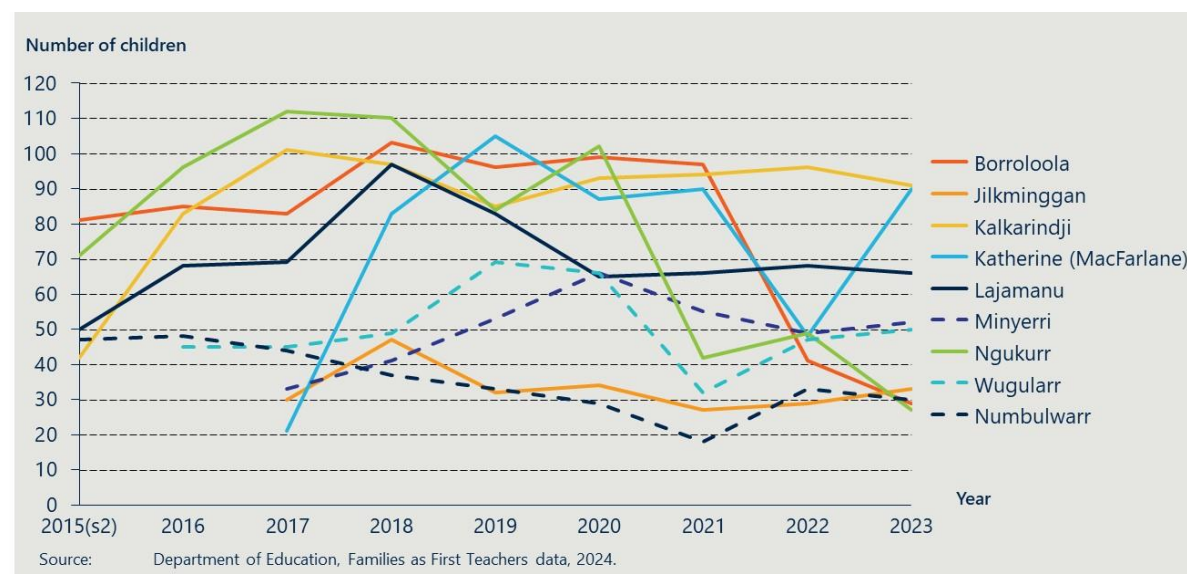


Figure 57 | Number of child participants by site, Central region, 2015-2023⁸⁶

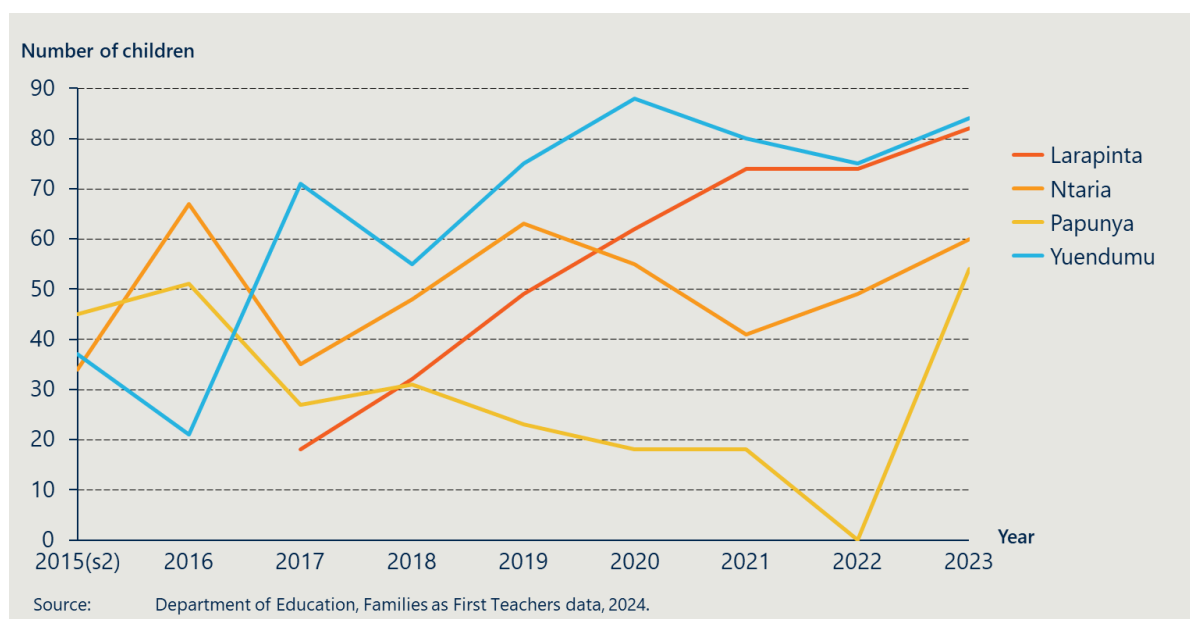
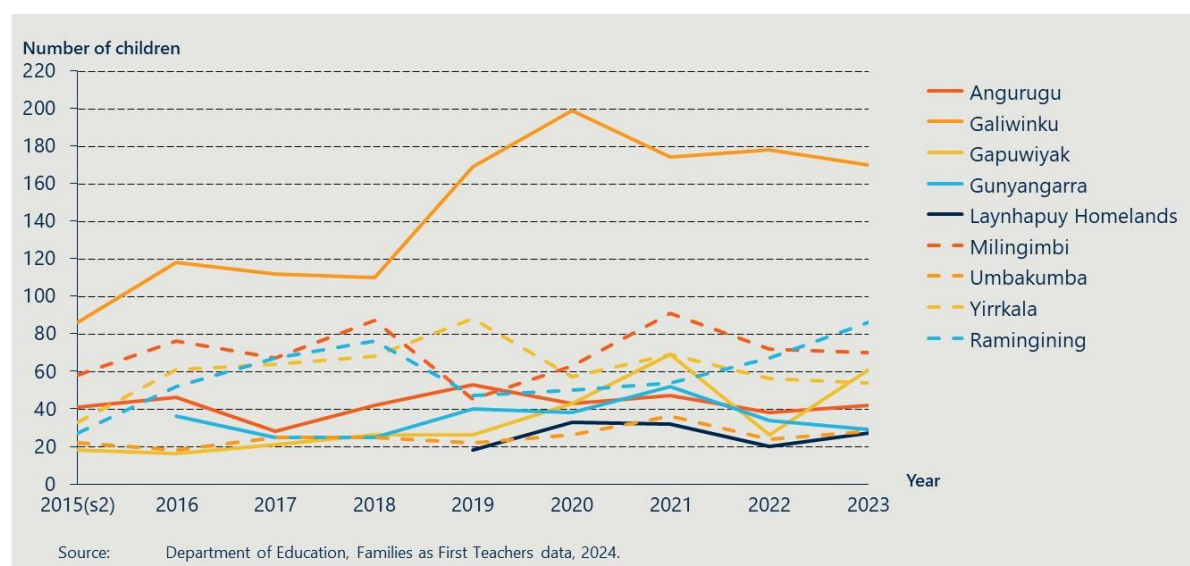


Figure 58 | Number of child participants by site, East Arnhem region, 2015-2023



⁸⁶ Noting that data for Papunya was not recorded at all during 2022 as it was inactive, resuming operations in 2023

Figure 59 | Number of child participants by site, Darwin region, 2015-2023

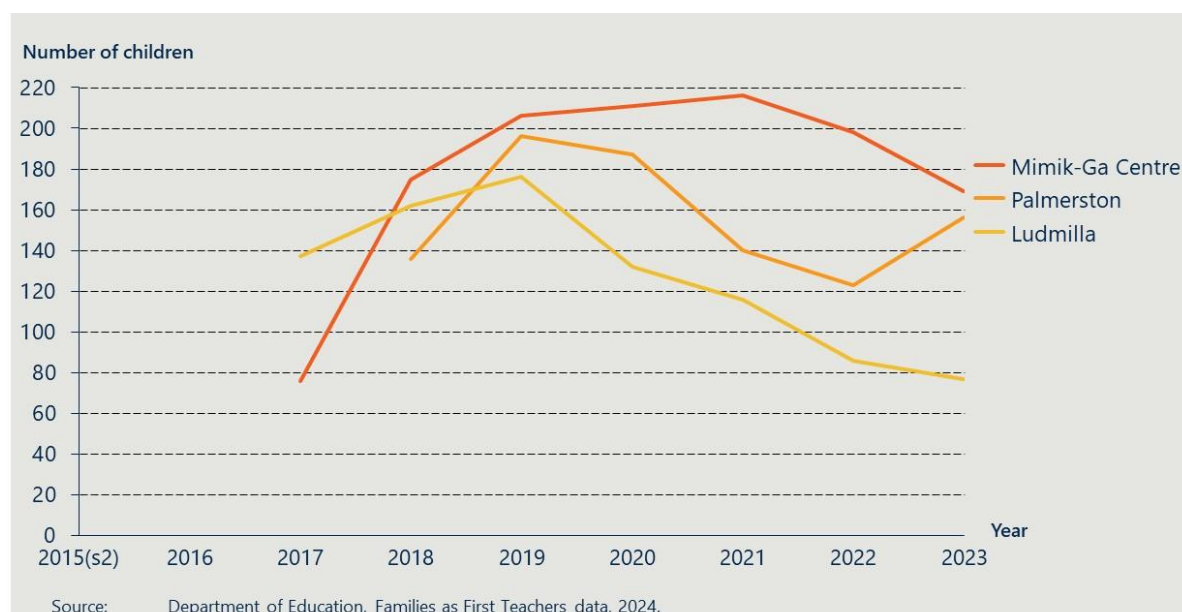
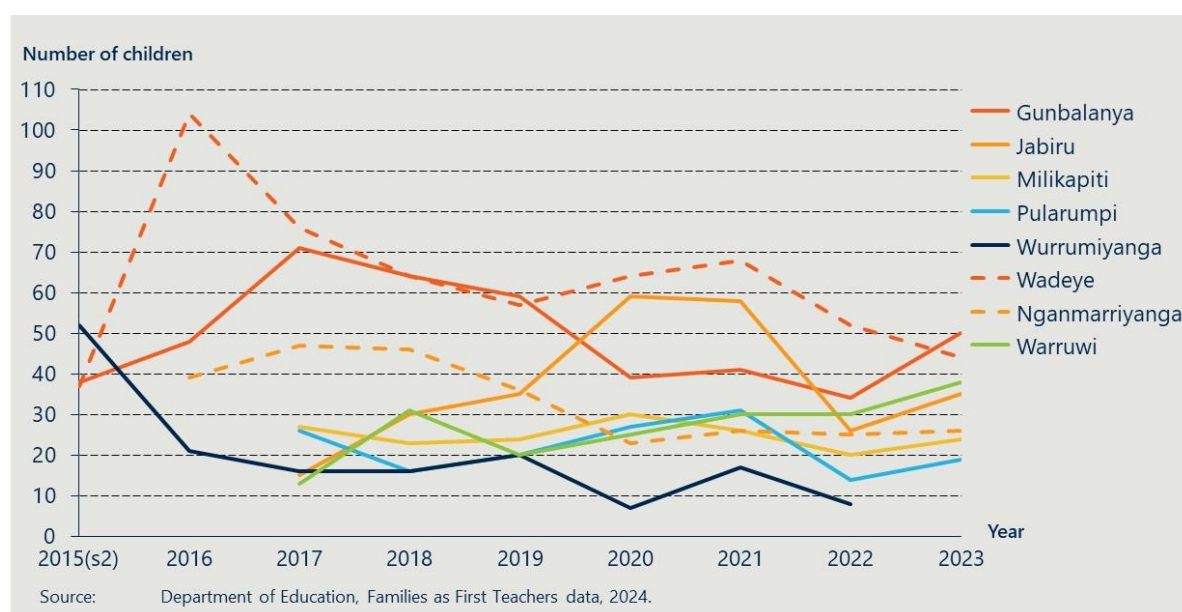


Figure 60 | Number of child participants by site, Top End region 2015-2023



H.2 Gender of child participants

Figure 61 | Gender of child participants, all sites, 2015-2022

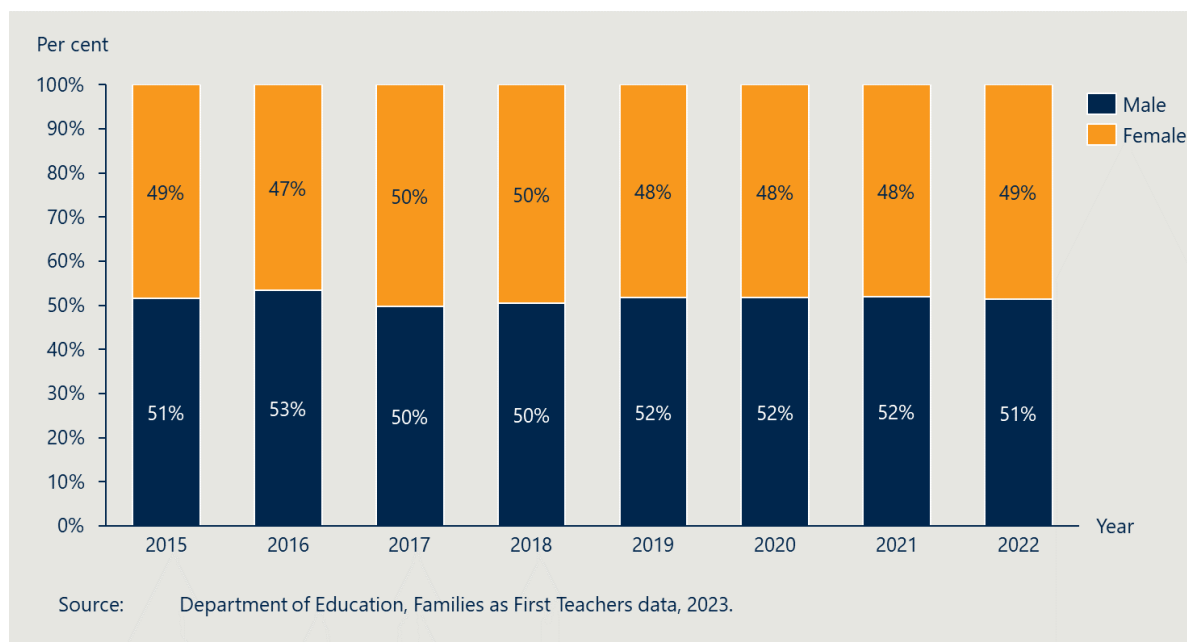
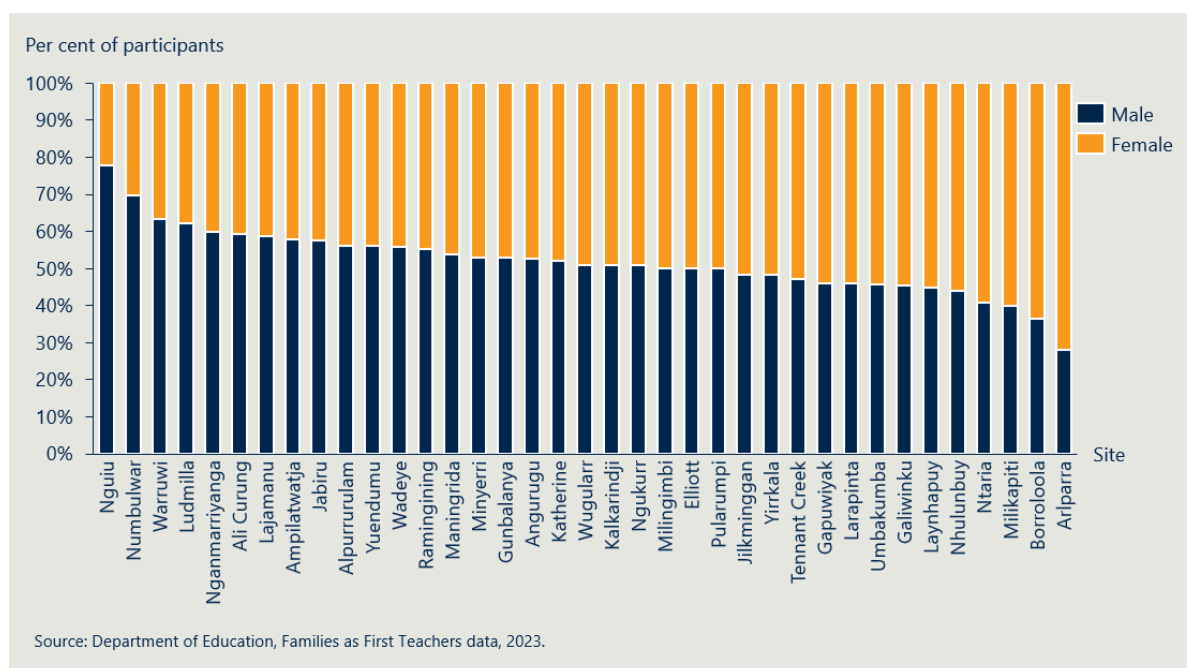


Figure 62 | Gender of child participants, by site, 2022⁸⁷



⁸⁷ The figure does not include data from Papunya, Palmerston and Mimik-Ga. According to stakeholders Papunya was not operational due to a lack of staff. Palmerston and Mimik-Ga are known to be operational, however there was no available data.

H.3 Age of child participants

Figure 63 | Age of child participants, all sites, 2015-2022

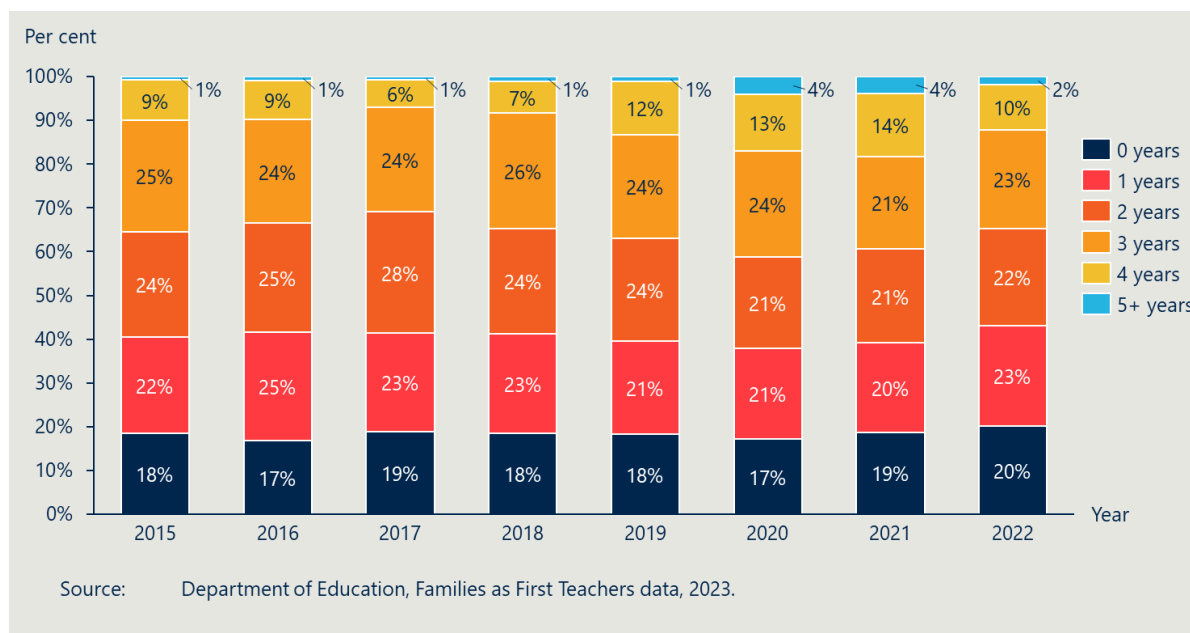
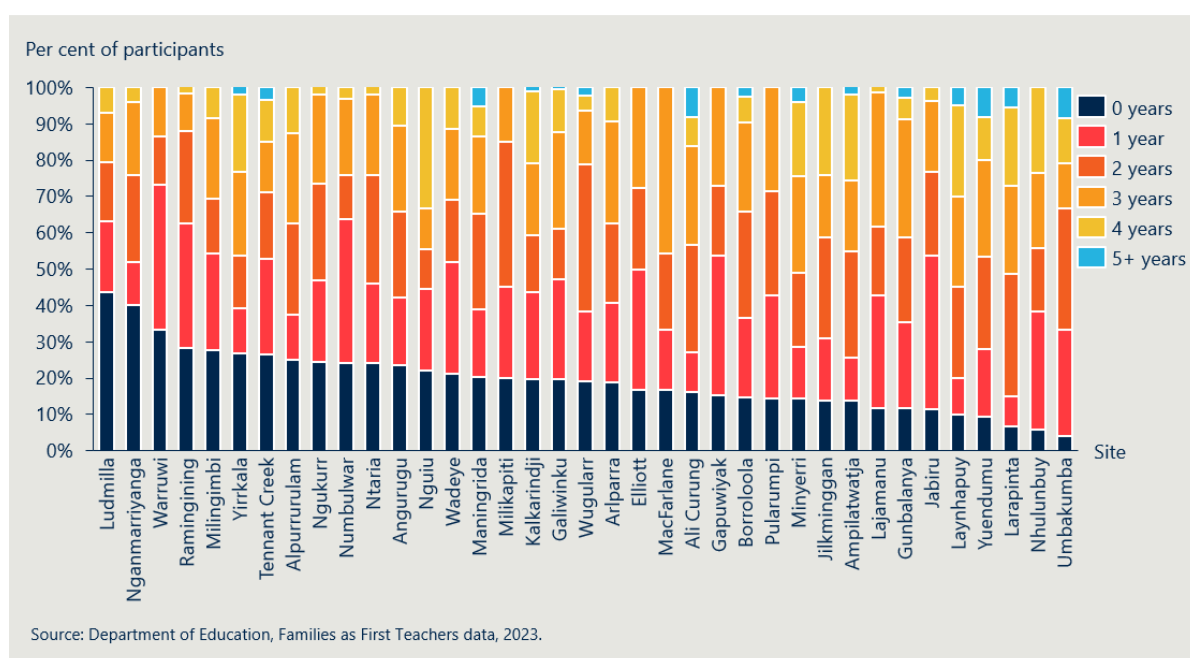


Figure 64 | Age of child participants, by site, 2022⁸⁸



H.4 Aboriginality status of child participants

⁸⁸ The figure does not include data from Papunya, Palmerston and Mimik-Ga. According to stakeholders Papunya was not operational due to a lack of staff. Palmerston and Mimik-Ga are known to be operational, however there was no available data.

Figure 65 | Aboriginal status of child participants, all sites, 2015-2022

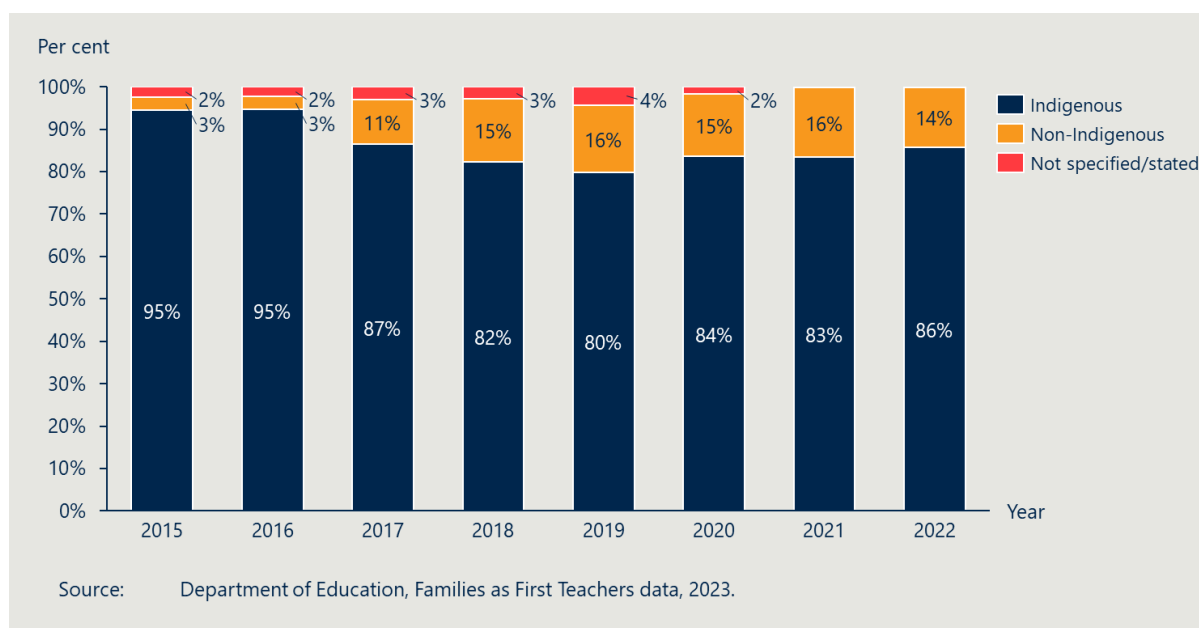
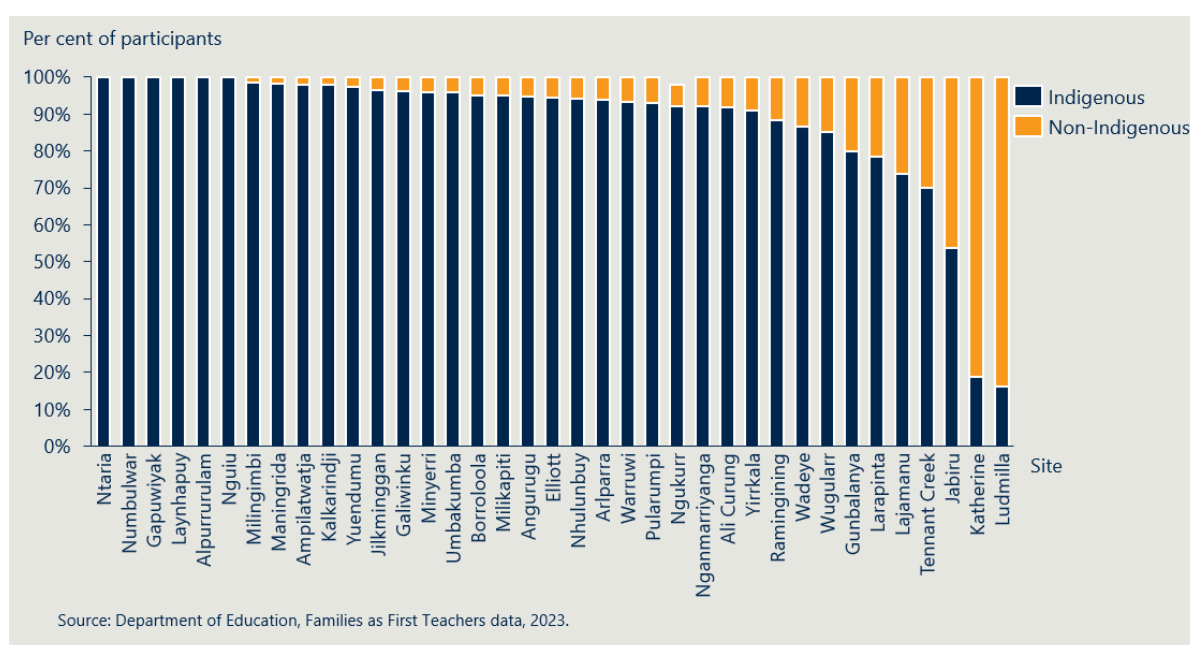


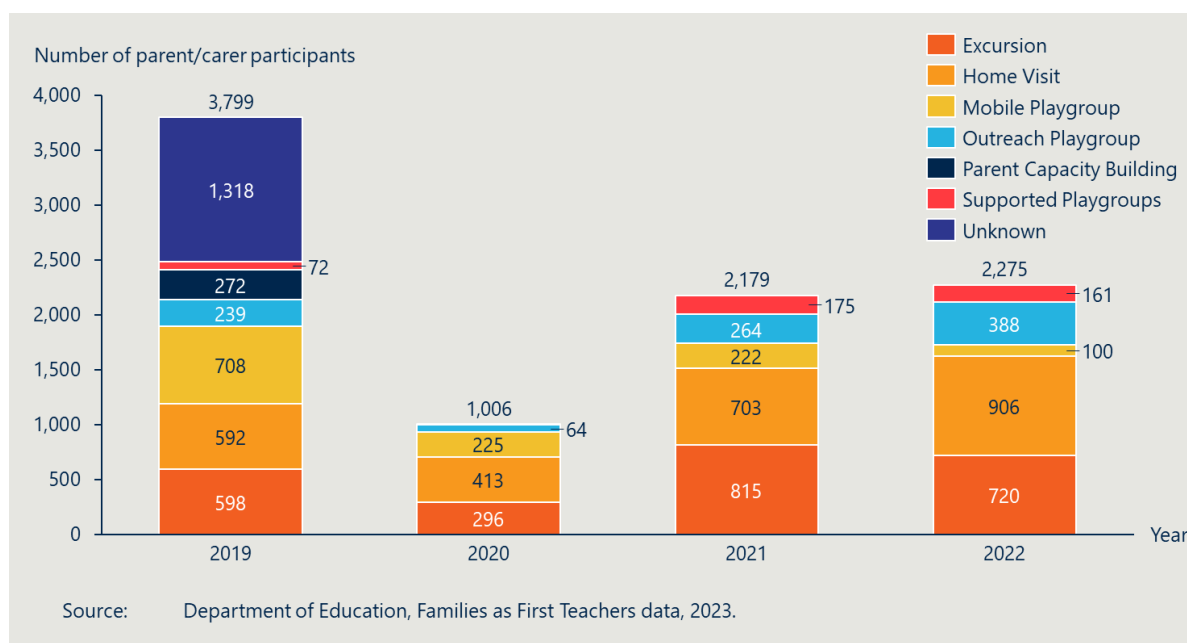
Figure 66 | Aboriginal status of child participants, by site, 2022⁸⁹



⁸⁹ The figure does not include data from Papunya, Palmerston and Mimik-Ga. According to stakeholders Papunya was not operational due to a lack of staff. Palmerston and Mimik-Ga are known to be operational, however there was no available data.

H.5 Home visits and mobile outreach services

Figure 67 | Number of participants in home visits and mobile outreach services, by year and delivery mode, 2019-2022



Appendix I Detailed conditions of success

Table 12 | Detailed description of each condition of success

Condition	Description	Examples
Rich understanding of parents and community	Where FaFT staff have a rich understanding of the needs of participating parents, the circumstances of non-participant parents and the overall needs and dynamics of the community, the site is better able to cultivate a relevant and effective program. This deep understanding helped to: - increase cultural appropriateness by better incorporating local language and culture into program design - improve responsiveness to issues and events in the community - identify opportunities to develop more effective engagement strategies and partnerships. Successful FaFT sites achieve this by creating formal and informal information channels, through the following: - organised yarning circles with families and the community - ad hoc interactions with participant families in the course of FaFT - relationships with key leaders in the community, including partner organisations. In some sites, maintaining a deep level of local understanding was a challenge, particularly in circumstances where a new FE had commenced with no previous connection with that community.	Example 1: This site used both the formal yarning circles at the commencement of term, and ongoing informal engagement with parents during the daily course of FaFT activities, to collect parents' input on how to run FaFT. This generated ideas about activities such as camping, learning on country, and hunting. The parents reflected that they felt FaFT staff listened to them. Example 2: At several sites, families reported they felt comfortable sharing their personal stories with the FLO, which then helped FaFT to be more responsive to their needs and circumstances. For example, parents would tell the FLO about sorry business or other factors that meant they did not feel like going to FaFT. Example 3: Through the partnership with the health clinic, this FaFT site was able to better understand barriers for parents not attending FaFT, including access to transport and a sense that the space was not culturally safe for them.
Strong local governance and	Successful FaFT sites benefit from strong leadership and governance structures, both within schools and through the Department. In particular, where school principals understand and support the mission,	Example 1: The principal at this FaFT site had been working with the local community to develop an early childhood plan to connect different services and programs in the community, including FaFT, to better support information

Condition	Description	Examples
support	scope and design of FaFT, sites are better positioned to fulfil their objectives. They can help create the authorising environment for FEs to be creative and adaptive in their program design (for example, running more outreach activities), and can bring institutional strength to build stronger partnerships with external agencies (rather than relying on the FE's personal relationships, creating a key person risk). Some stakeholders identified negative outcomes where principals did not have a good understanding of FaFT, including where FEs were resourced onto non-FaFT activities, such as conducting preschool assessments. Some stakeholders were critical of principals who, in their assessment, viewed FaFT as a playgroup, leading to a failure to recognise the adult capacity building element and an assumption that it should be run during set hours. In sites where schools had active school boards or reference groups, made up of Aboriginal community members, these entities were able to guide program design and community partnerships, and provide input on how to respond to challenges in the community. Some sites pointed to the importance of a strong program leader in the Department and additional support from other FaFT corporate staff. Particularly for less experienced FEs, the availability and support from the Department is important.	sharing, service integration and consistency in terms of strategy and outcomes. Example 2: This FaFT site linked its program design to the overall cultural curriculum developed by the Aboriginal-led School Council. This helped to ensure local culture and language was integrated into FaFT activities, such as learning games, and also provided linkages between FaFT and the broader school community, which was following the same cultural curriculum. Example 3: The Aboriginal-led School Council at this FaFT site formed an action group to respond to severe tension and conflict between family groups in the community as a result of a critical incident that had occurred outside of school. The action group worked with the school, including FaFT, to ensure families felt safe to attend and managed attendance so that the conflicting parties were not attending at the same time. Example 4: A newly appointed FE described feeling welcomed and supported by the Department's corporate support team, being provided with resources and having training opportunities organised and identified (including ASQ-TRAK training).
Effective engagement and outreach	Effective engagement and outreach help FaFT sites to connect with more families and make FaFT more accessible. Several stakeholders reported that these strategies were essential for reaching the more at-risk, "hard-to-reach" families in the community. Strong engagement and outreach also increased the visibility of FaFT generally in the community, raising the profile and fostering greater interest amongst potential participants. Effective engagement and outreach both strengthens and is strengthened by a good understanding of the local community. It can be used to identify specific needs and challenges, such as conflict in the community and access to transport. It can also help FaFT sites to	Example 1: The FE at this FaFT site would coordinate FaFT sessions in different parts of the community, including in a forest, at the beach or on a vacant block near families' houses. This approach was often used to engage with families who were not attending FaFT due to specific reasons, such as access to transport or coercive and controlling relationships. The FE reported that where FaFT was run close to home (in some cases within eyeshot), families felt more confident and comfortable to attend, and that these experiences helped encourage these families to eventually attend at the established FaFT site. Example 2: This FaFT site was located in a larger, geographically spread-out community. Many families did not live within walking distance of the FaFT site. The FaFT site coordinated transport arrangements directly with parents and had

Condition	Description	Examples
	find creative ways to involve and include men in FaFT, including by organising activities outside of standard work hours and coordinating with community events that typically involve men, such as football or hunting. Transport to and from FaFT was one of the most successful engagement elements amongst FaFT sites where it was available. Many families reported that without the availability of a FaFT or school bus to pick them up, they were unlikely to attend. Successful engagement and outreach was highly dependent on the amount of time available to the FE to plan and conduct these activities, and the access to resources, including a vehicle.	access to a designated FaFT vehicle, in addition to the availability of a general school bus. Parents have positive feedback about the availability of transport. Example 3: This FaFT site had previously collaborated with the local men's program to organise a cooking activity one night per week in the FaFT space, where men from the community would cook dinner for FaFT families.
Safe, supportive spaces	Successful FaFT sites create a welcoming space where parents, particularly mothers, feel safe and supported. These sites give parents the opportunity to socialise and build relationships with each other, as well as with the FaFT staff. Many parents describe FaFT as a safe and trusting environment, and many staff observed that over time parents will generally look after each other's children at FaFT and trust other parents to do the same. By developing strong relationships with each other, parents can support each other with the FaFT activities. The layer of trust that is associated with FaFT helps some external providers engage with families in a safer way than they would otherwise be able to. By engaging through FaFT, the providers are endorsed with the same degree of trust as the FaFT program. It also allows providers to deliver their services in a comfortable space rather than an unfamiliar and potentially culturally unsafe space.	Example 1: The community at this site had been experiencing tension and conflict between people from different areas of the community. FaFT was seen as a safe place where families could go without fear of being affected by the conflict. Example 2: The mothers attending this site reported that FaFT was an important space for them to get away from arguing at home, and that they felt comfortable to talk to the other mothers at FaFT about these issues. This site was in the process of engaging with an external service to provide additional counselling and mental health support to the mothers at FaFT. Example 3: The staff at this site reported that it was the trusting relationships that had been developed at FaFT that allowed for successful engagement with other services and tools. They noted that the element of trust was essential for the successful use of the ASQ-TRAK tool.
Collaborative service partnerships	Building strong, collaborative partnerships between FaFT sites and other service providers and agencies operating in the community creates a mutually beneficial relationship. FaFT sites can gather useful information and data to support their programs and build their understanding of the community's needs. Service providers and other partner agencies are able to have more meaningful and targeted	Example 1: This site partnered with the local health clinic to establish a space within FaFT for use by the clinic to conduct regular checkups, education, immunisations, follow-up appointments, and assessments through the Healthy Under 5 Kids (HU5K) Program. The clinic reported that parents felt more culturally safe receiving health care in the FaFT environment. The FaFT site also experienced increased engagement as a result of the partnership, both because the access to health care was an incentive to attend, and because the clinic identified and

Condition	Description	Examples
	engagements with the families participating in FaFT. The development of partnerships with other providers was largely the responsibility of the FE and the FLO. Some sites, particularly those where Connected Beginnings or CFCs were in operation, had the capacity to approach service partnerships strategically. At one site, the FaFT team employed an additional administrative staff member to support engagement of new families and processing of referrals to other service providers. This further strengthened the partnerships with other services. Where the school is able to support FaFT in developing and maintaining partnerships, this reduces the risk that service partnerships are relationship-based through an individual staff-member, which can lead to challenges when that staff member leaves the school.	referred new parents to FaFT. Example 2: Through partnerships with the local clinic, this site collated data on the number of families with children under the age of 5 in the community, allowing them to track the number who were not engaging with the FaFT program, and to better monitor the effectiveness of FaFT's engagement strategies. Example 3: This site benefited from strategic partnerships through the Connected Beginnings program to connect with a range of services and agencies, in some cases adopting formal service agreements and memoranda of understanding to strengthen the relationships.



A bigger idea of success

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We realise a bigger idea of success.

A bigger idea
of success

750

PEOPLE

75

PRINCIPALS

5

COUNTRIES

+80.7

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