



Strengthening economic evaluation of early childhood interventions in NSW

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We pay respect to Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of Australia.

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Executive summary

Early childhood intervention programs are designed to improve outcomes for children and families through earlier access to support, thereby reducing long-term demand for services.

Evidence shows that effective interventions can not only improve the wellbeing of children and their families but also generate substantial returns across health, education, social and justice systems.

While many programs have positive outcomes, in the current New South Wales (NSW) evaluation and budget context, many programs are unable to demonstrate these economic benefits in a way that informs decision-making.

Early childhood interventions generate substantial non-market benefits, including improved wellbeing, stronger mental health and enhanced non-cognitive skills. Traditional economic evaluation tools struggle to incorporate these impacts. As a result, the measured benefits of early childhood programs often understate their true social and economic value.

This paper examines some of the economic evaluation challenges in NSW early childhood intervention programs. It reviews how these programs are currently evaluated and identifies barriers to generating robust economic evidence.

The paper highlights five opportunities available to the NSW Government to strengthen the use of economic evaluation in funding and scaling decisions:

1

Strengthen longitudinal and cross-sector data systems to capture long-term outcomes more accurately.

2

Embed evaluation capability across government so that frontline agencies, not just specialist units, can assess whether their programs deliver value for money.

3

Promote regulatory experimentation and adaptive policymaking, such as through piloting and testing interventions before major rollouts, to build evidence in real-world conditions.

4

Incorporate avoided costs and second-round fiscal effects into budget processes, ensuring that the savings from prevention are counted alongside the costs.

5

Integrate the Marginal Value of Public Funds into policymaking, to compare programs based on total social and fiscal returns.

NSW has built strong foundations for economic evaluation. The next step is ensuring we know not just what works, but what is worth it. With better economic evidence, government can invest with confidence in programs that deliver lasting returns for children, families and taxpayers.

Policy opportunities – at a glance

1

Strengthen longitudinal and cross-sector data systems

Stronger and more comprehensive data infrastructure would help capture long-term outcomes and broader cross-system benefits, enabling more accurate assessments of preventive investments. There are opportunities for the NSW Government to further strengthen integrated databases to track children's outcomes across health, education and social services over time, building on the work of the NSW Human Services Dataset and others. Other opportunities include consideration of linked data with Commonwealth Government services.

2

Embed evaluation capability across government

Evaluation expertise often sits in specialist units where frontline agencies cannot easily access it or embed it within their programs. NSW could strengthen evaluation capability across government by designating evaluation leads in every agency, building cross-agency networks and partnering with universities to grow practical analytical capability.

3

Promote regulatory experimentation and adaptive policymaking

The NSW Government could support departments to pilot, test and refine interventions using randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental methods. This reduces risk, builds stakeholder confidence and ensures programs are continuously improved based on real-world evidence.

4

Incorporate avoided costs and second-round fiscal effects into budget processes

Current budget rules prioritise short-term costs over long-term returns, creating a structural bias against preventive investments. This approach undervalues programs like early childhood education and health interventions, especially when benefits accrue across decades or in other portfolios. Reforming NSW budget rules to include second-round fiscal effects and longer timeframes would enable whole-of-government decisions that reflect true value and intergenerational benefits.

5

Integrate Marginal Value of Public Funds into policymaking

Adopting advanced frameworks such as the Marginal Value of Public Funds could allow policymakers to compare not only interventions that generate fiscal savings, but also the overall value created for individuals and society. Together, these approaches would align fiscal planning with the true economic value of early childhood investments and strengthen the case for scaling preventive programs.

Background

The first five years of life are a critical period for child development.

During these early years, children's brains develop rapidly, laying the foundations for lifelong learning, health and wellbeing. Support during this window can promote wellbeing and prevent disadvantage while, subsequently, also reducing the need for costly crisis services later.¹



Research confirms that high-quality early childhood programs improve outcomes for children and families. These programs are associated with better school readiness, stronger family relationships, fewer behavioural problems and reduced contact with child protection and justice systems.² The benefits extend into adulthood through improved health, higher employment and greater economic participation.

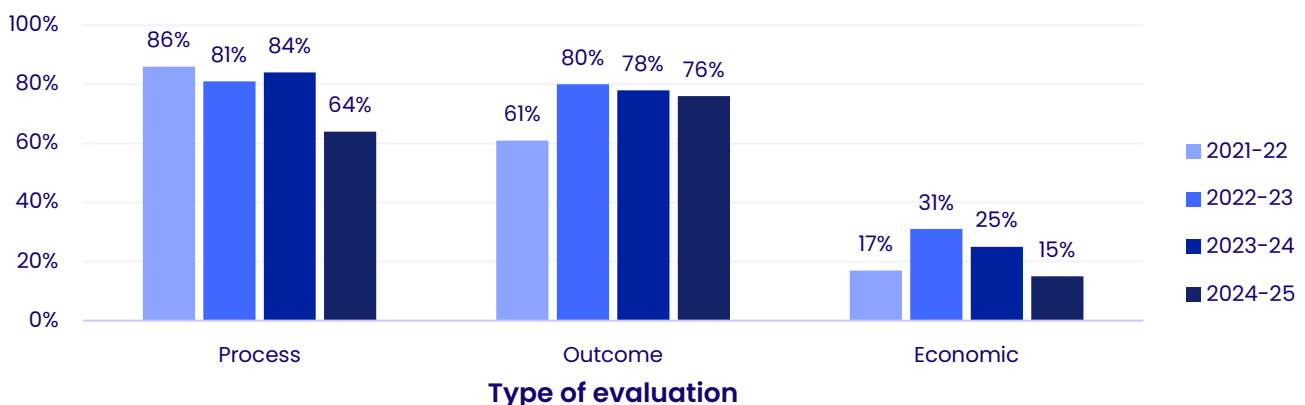
Recognising these long-term benefits, governments in Australia have increasingly prioritised early childhood intervention as a key component of social policy. In NSW, significant investments have been made in programs across health, education and family support services that aim to improve outcomes during children's most formative years.³

This growing investment has been accompanied by efforts to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking. NSW has invested in evidence infrastructure to support rigorous policy analysis and program evaluation. Initiatives such as NSW Treasury's Centre for Economic Evidence, the Evidence Portal, managed by the Department of Communities and Justice, and updated Treasury evaluation guidelines aim to strengthen analytical capability and embed evaluation from program design through to delivery.

These initiatives allow the government to assess whether programs are achieving their intended goals. Many early childhood initiatives have been evaluated for effectiveness (whether outcomes improve) and for implementation (whether programs are delivered as intended). However, far fewer have been assessed through economic evaluation.

NSW Treasury's Evidence Bank Annual Insights Report for 2025 confirms the same pattern across government. Between 2021 and 2025, economic evaluations consistently represented the smallest share of completed evaluations – well behind process and outcome evaluations (Figure 1).

Figure 1 | Per cent of total completed evaluations that included process, outcomes and economic evaluations.⁴



Without economic evidence, policymakers cannot make fully informed decisions about the collective financial benefit of investing in programs. For early intervention programs in particular, the absence of economic analysis makes it difficult to determine whether investing early delivers greater value than responding later. As a result, effective programs may struggle to scale because their comparative impact has not been measured.

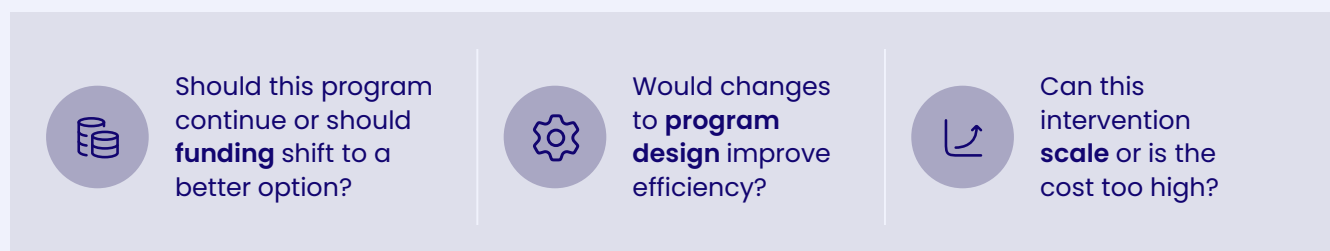
Improving investment decision-making for early intervention requires progress on two related fronts. First, governments need stronger evidence on which programs deliver the greatest impact for the resources invested, including better use of economic evaluation methods. Second, public investment and budget frameworks must be able to account for the long-term and cross-portfolio benefits generated by early intervention.

This paper examines how these challenges play out in early childhood policy in NSW. It reviews how early childhood interventions are currently evaluated, identifies barriers to stronger economic evidence and highlights opportunities to strengthen the use of economic evaluation to support more effective investment in early intervention.

The value of economic evaluation

Economic evaluation provides a systematic way to compare what programs cost against what they deliver – across monetary, health, educational and social dimensions. It helps policymakers prioritise between competing initiatives and allocate limited resources more effectively.⁵

It does more than produce a cost-benefit ratio. Good economic evaluation helps answer practical policy questions:

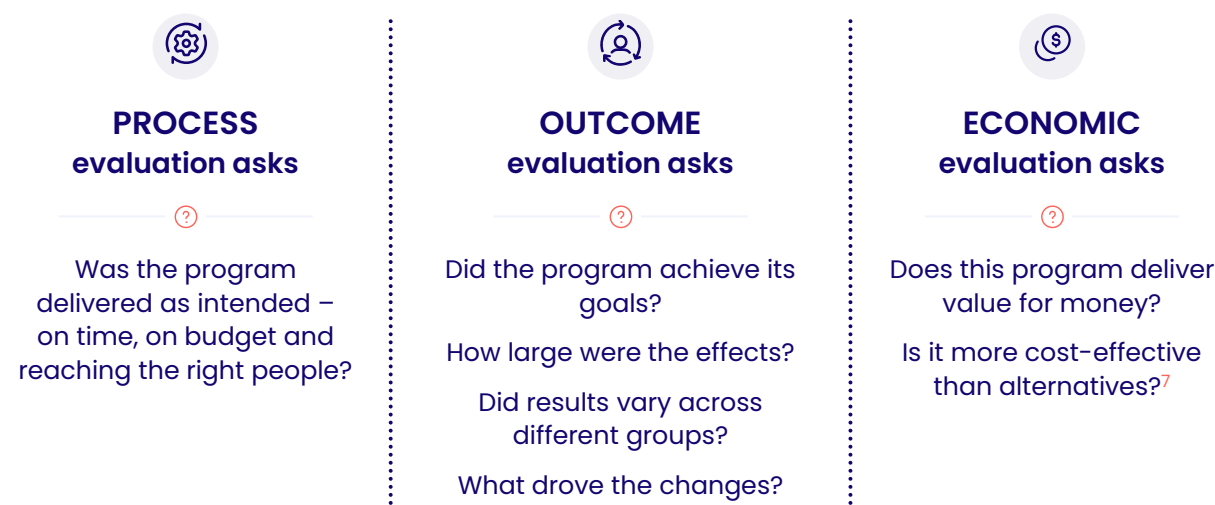


Governments need to weigh short-term spending against long-term outcomes. This matters especially in early childhood policy. Costs are immediate but benefits often appear over many years and across different parts of government. A health or education program funded today may reduce justice costs 20 years later. Without economic evaluation that captures these long-term, cross-portfolio effects, prevention programs will continue to lose out to more immediate spending pressures.

Economic evaluation is a growing part of public governance, especially for prevention and early intervention. NSW Government's growing emphasis on economic evaluation reflects a broader shift towards transparency, accountability and long-term efficiency. In recent years, NSW Government agencies (Department of Transport, Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Treasury) have invested in building capability and resources for economic evaluation across government.⁶

What 'good evidence' looks like

The Australian Centre for Evaluation (in the Australian Treasury) sets out a complete approach to program assessment built on three components:



Randomised controlled trials provide the strongest evidence of program effects, but they are not always feasible. Practical constraints, such as ethical concerns, political realities or the nature of the intervention, sometimes rule them out.

Australia has invested heavily in building an evidence base for early childhood intervention. The national research portfolio includes 43 randomised controlled trials of early development programs – a substantial commitment to understanding what works.⁸

When randomised controlled trials are not possible, alternative methods can still deliver rigorous evidence: regression discontinuity, difference-in-differences and instrumental variables all allow credible causal inference under the right conditions.

Mixed-methods evaluation which combine quantitative data with qualitative insights, help explain why programs succeed or struggle, supporting continuous improvement and informing decisions about scaling.

Australian economic evaluations

The economic case for early childhood investment is well established in Australian program evaluations. Evidence shows strong returns across a range of interventions.

PwC projected that investment in early childhood education and care could deliver \$7–9.3 billion in net present value terms. In cumulative terms to 2050, this included \$6 billion from higher female workforce participation, up to \$10.3 billion from improved child outcomes and \$13.3 billion from greater participation by vulnerable children.⁹

Program-level evaluations support this broader finding. Cost-benefit analysis of the Family Connect and Support program, delivered by NSW Department of Communities and Justice, found social returns of \$1.10 to \$4.90 for every dollar invested. These returns came mainly from the avoidance of child protection interventions and the strengthening of family support services.¹⁰

The Family Wellbeing program, an Aboriginal-developed empowerment program that has been running for over 30 years, is now delivered in more than 60 sites across Australia. An economic evaluation of its implementation in Yarrabah, a community in Far North Queensland, found it returned \$4.80 for every dollar invested between 2001 and 2021, with reduced suicide in the community the largest measured benefit: this is economic value combined with profound social impact.¹¹

These findings point to a clear policy opportunity. Early childhood intervention is one in which better social outcomes and lower long-term costs are strongly aligned. Programs that improve child development, strengthen families and reduce intergenerational disadvantage also reduce demand for costly crisis services across health, education, welfare and justice. This is not a standard policy trade-off. In early childhood, effective intervention can improve outcomes and enhance fiscal efficiency simultaneously.

Comparing programs, not just funding them

Economic evaluation helps policymakers make better choices across a portfolio of programs. It allows governments to compare options side by side and direct funding to interventions that deliver the strongest overall return.

This supports accountability. Clear cost-benefit evidence makes funding decisions more transparent and easier to defend. It helps answer a basic question from ministers and treasurers: why fund this program rather than another?

It also supports sustainability. Programs without a strong economic case are more exposed when governments change or budgets tighten.

When programs show strong outcomes and a strong economic case, they build support. That support enables expansion. Expansion generates more data, strengthens the evidence base and supports further improvement.

How NSW implements evaluation

This research is based on publicly available information. NSW Treasury has indicated that some relevant analysis may not be publicly available and that some programs may have ongoing evaluation efforts underway to address existing evidence gaps. The findings presented here should be interpreted as indicative of the publicly documented evidence base rather than a comprehensive assessment of all evaluation activity across government.

NSW has built strong infrastructure for evidence-based policymaking. Investments in evaluation systems, data platforms and analytical capability provide a solid foundation for assessing program effectiveness and informing public investment decisions.

NSW has invested in key tools to support evidence-based policymaking, including:

The Evidence Bank shares evaluation findings across government. This reduces duplication and helps effective approaches spread between agencies. When one department develops a successful program or evaluation method, others can draw on that work.

In 2026, NSW Treasury launched **the Evaluation Library**. It collects and makes it easier for public servants, researchers and the public to find and use evaluation evidence.

The Evidence Portal, managed by the Department of Communities and Justice, provides agencies with access to evidence reviews, validated programs and rigorously evaluated approaches for vulnerable populations. It emphasises culturally responsive programs, including Aboriginal-led early support programs.

The Centre for Economic Evidence provides practical resources, including the NSW Government Investment Framework, cost-benefit analysis tools and business case guidelines. Treasury's evaluation guidelines (TPG22-22) encourage agencies to plan evaluation from the design stage and clarify when cost-benefit analysis should be used.

The Department of Communities and Justice published **the Benefits Database** in 2025, which provides standard values for human services cost-benefit analysis, enabling more robust analysis to support business decisions and program evaluation.¹²

Taken together, these initiatives provide a comprehensive foundation for evidence-informed policymaking. The key question is whether this infrastructure is being consistently used to inform investment decisions.

This research reviewed 28 NSW Government-funded early childhood intervention programs, including both active and discontinued initiatives. This research assessed the strength of evidence underpinning them, drawing on grey literature, published studies and government sources to identify the types of evaluation used across the portfolio.

Each program was cross-referenced against available research, including NSW Department of Health systematic reviews and meta-analyses. This allowed us to assess the evidence supporting current policy decisions and identify where further evaluation could strengthen investment decisions and support program design.

The analysis reveals a clear pattern. While most programs have been evaluated for outcomes and effectiveness, economic evaluation remains uncommon.

Key findings

Annex A summarises seven early childhood intervention programs – some national or from other jurisdictions – for which economic evaluation findings are available.

Among those that have been rigorously assessed, most deliver positive returns on public investment while achieving their intended outcomes. These results suggest that well-designed early childhood interventions can generate both social and economic benefits.

The results also reinforce the importance of maintaining a diverse mix of interventions within the early childhood system. Different programs serve different populations – universal services for all families, targeted support for those at elevated risk and intensive interventions for complex needs. A well-functioning early childhood system requires a range of responses, with funding decisions informed by evidence about which approaches work best for which groups.

Where rigorous economic analysis has been conducted, it has identified specific programs with strong economic cases. Early childhood education and care has been estimated to return at least \$2.99 in public benefits for every dollar spent; while early intervention for children with moderate to severe autism has been estimated to deliver net economic benefits of \$1.15 million (moderate) to \$1.25 million (severe) per child.¹³ In NSW, the Kids Early Years Network was estimated to save government \$2.54 for every dollar invested (the midpoint of a \$0.70 to \$4.38 range).¹⁴

In addition, the portfolio review also highlights a significant evidence gap. Several programs with evidence of effectiveness have only limited publicly available economic evaluation. This means that, for many programs, government can point to evidence that outcomes improved but has less public evidence on whether those outcomes were achieved at a reasonable cost or how the programs compare with alternative investments. Moreover, the Targeted Earlier Intervention program demonstrates that the translation of economic evidence into policy and funding decisions is not always straightforward, particularly where key benefits are difficult to quantify and may therefore be underrepresented in formal evaluations.

CASE STUDY 1

NSW Targeted Earlier Intervention program

Flexible, community-based
and tailored to local
circumstance.



Family support

Social-emotional development

Skills-building

Strengthening protective
factors for high-risk families

The NSW Targeted Earlier Intervention program is designed to be flexible, community-based and tailored to local circumstance. Rather than delivering a single standardised intervention, the program encompasses a range of services: family support, social-emotional development, skills-building and strengthening protective factors for high-risk families.

A distinctive feature is the program's emphasis on cultural safety, particularly for Aboriginal families. Targeted Earlier Intervention prioritises healing, kinship connections and long-term resilience, with services designed and often delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. This culturally responsive approach aims to strengthen child and family safety while building more connected, inclusive communities.

The program has undergone rigorous outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative methods.¹⁵ The findings show positive impacts on child safety, including reduced contact with the child protection system and fewer out-of-home care placements – outcomes with substantial long-term benefits for children, families and communities.

Alongside this, the program has undergone economic evaluation.

TOTAL PROGRAM
COSTS, 2022-2023

**\$181
million**

QUANTIFIED SAFETY BENEFITS,
2022-2023

**\$92
million**

including \$79 million in avoided
government costs and
\$13 million in individual benefits.

BENEFIT-COST
RATIO

51 cents

of quantified safety
benefit for every
dollar spent.

On the surface, this suggests that measured benefits do not justify program costs.

However, the result largely reflects the limits of what was included in the analysis. Evaluators intentionally used conservative assumptions and excluded benefits that could not be quantified, such as domestic and family violence outcomes, benefits for clients of group-based services who could not be linked to data and benefits of the Community Strengthening stream. These outcomes are central to the program's objectives but do not translate easily into conventional cost-benefit models. With a stronger evidence base, the program's benefit-cost ratio could be higher and better reflect the full benefit that the program provides in the medium-term.

CASE STUDY 2

Start Strong

Universal early childhood education initiative and one of the state's largest investments in children.



Low-income families

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

Children with disabilities

Children requiring English language support

Start Strong is NSW's flagship universal early childhood education initiative and one of the state's largest investments in children. The program delivers 600 hours of quality preschool education per year, in line with national policy commitments, at an annual cost of \$480–550 million.¹⁶

The investment takes two forms: operational funding for service delivery and fee relief of up to \$4,347 per child through community and mobile preschools. Crucially, the subsidy structure prioritises children most likely to benefit from early intervention – those from low-income families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities and children requiring English language support.

ANNUAL INVESTMENT	PRESCHOOL EDUCATION	FEE RELIEF
\$480-550 million	600 hours	up to \$4,347
per year	of quality preschool education per year	Per child

Start Strong addresses a real barrier: without subsidies, many families cannot afford quality preschool and children who would benefit most are least likely to attend. The program's design tackles this equity gap while building the reach needed for population-level impact.

Start Strong has expanded access, lifted participation among priority groups and delivered measurable improvements in early learning outcomes. By these measures, it ranks among NSW's most successful social investments.

Despite its scale and demonstrated impact, Start Strong lacks comprehensive economic evaluation. Government knows the program works – but cannot fully quantify its value for money, compare it rigorously against alternatives, or identify where design changes might improve efficiency.

For a \$500 million annual investment, this gap matters. Without economic evidence, policymakers cannot answer basic questions: What is the return on this spending? Could the same outcomes be achieved with investment in different forms? Are there ways to optimise the subsidy structure?

NSW Government has announced that Start Strong program will be replaced in 2027 with a Universal Preschool Funding program.¹⁷

CASE STUDY 3

Kids Early Years Network

Early intervention initiative to improve outcomes for vulnerable families with children aged 0–5 years



Health

Education

Social services

Community services

The Kids Early Years Network (KEYS) is an early intervention initiative developed in Western Sydney to improve outcomes for vulnerable families with children aged 0–5 years. The program aims to address barriers to accessing support services by coordinating health, education, social and community services around whole-of-family needs. It was the first program funded through the NSW Government's investment approach, reflecting an explicit focus on improving outcomes while generating long-term savings for government.¹⁸

Unlike other early childhood interventions, KEYS was accompanied by a structured approach to evaluation from an early stage of implementation. Outcome evaluation indicated that improved engagement with services has the potential to reduce future involvement with child protection, out-of-home care, housing assistance, and justice services, while improving educational outcomes and family wellbeing.

Economic evaluation examined a range of potential impact scenarios. Under a conservative scenario, the program was estimated to generate \$0.70 in savings for every dollar invested (i.e., not economically justifiable). Under a stronger impact scenario, the program was estimated to generate \$4.38 in savings for every dollar invested, equivalent to more than \$4 of avoided future government expenditure for every \$1 invested in the program (i.e., economically justifiable).¹⁹

CONSERVATIVE SCENARIO

\$0.70

Savings for every dollar invested

Not economically justifiable

STRONGER IMPACT SCENARIO

\$4.38

Savings for every dollar invested

Economically justifiable

Additionally, the program was designed to support information sharing and data collection through an Information Sharing Solution, intended to collect referral and family plan data and support the ongoing evaluation of service effectiveness. This approach provides government with a stronger basis for understanding not only whether the program works, but also how it works, for whom it works and whether benefits justify the cost of investment.

From a policy perspective, the Kids Early Years Network provides a useful point of comparison with both the Targeted Earlier Intervention program and Start Strong. While Targeted Earlier Intervention highlights challenges in translating evaluation findings into decision-making and Start Strong demonstrates the limitations of having little publicly available economic evaluation evidence, KEYS illustrates how economic evaluation can be embedded within program design from the outset. Through modelling and return-on-investment analysis, the program was designed to generate evidence to inform future policy and funding decisions.

Challenges in economic evaluations

The shortage of economic evaluation in NSW early childhood programs reflects barriers in data systems, measurement methods and institutional coordination that make rigorous economic analysis difficult.

NSW currently lacks the fully integrated data infrastructure needed to track children's outcomes over time and across services. NSW has made progress in building comprehensive linked datasets, such as the NSW Human Services Dataset; however, barriers remain. Data in these sets is linked retrospectively, meaning there may be significant lag between service delivery, data collection, data linkage and release for analysis.

Data quality issues compound this challenge. Findings from the NSW Department of Communities and Justice indicate that data entry across service providers remains inconsistent, with some activities not fully captured.²⁰ Stronger data quality would improve assessments of program effectiveness, support economic analysis and improve the quality of evidence available to guide investment decisions.

Even where data exists, many of the benefits from early childhood programs are inherently difficult to quantify. Effective programs often produce outcomes such as improved parenting confidence, stronger family relationships, better social-emotional development, strengthened cultural identity and reduced exposure to harmful experiences. These outcomes are central to children's development but do not translate easily into conventional economic metrics. Many of these benefits only emerge years or even decades after the intervention or accrue across families and communities rather than in individual participants.

Early childhood interventions also generate substantial non-market benefits, including improved wellbeing, stronger mental health and enhanced non-cognitive skills.²¹ Traditional economic evaluation tools struggle to incorporate these impacts. As a result, the measured benefits of early childhood programs often understate their true social and economic value.²²

Strengthening economic evaluation

Strengthening methods to capture long-term and cross-system benefits would allow governments to make more informed decisions about investments in early intervention.

Complementing traditional evaluation methods with approaches such as Social Return on Investment and shadow pricing can help assign value to social and developmental outcomes that are not readily captured through conventional economic analysis.

Social Return on Investment captures social and cultural impacts that standard methods miss.

Shadow pricing assigns financial values to less tangible outcomes that are not typically measured in monetary terms, enabling decision-makers to account for the full impact of programs.

Another approach to economic evaluation is Marginal Value of Public Funds analysis. It examines the benefits of interventions for individuals – measured by how much people would be willing to pay for those benefits – compared with the costs to government, including both upfront program spending and long-term fiscal effects. By comparing benefits and costs in this way, Marginal Value of Public Funds analysis provides a picture of overall social value and helps overcome common challenges in evaluating and justifying early childhood investments.

Unlike traditional cost-benefit analysis, Marginal Value of Public Funds incorporates a wider range of benefits and fiscal effects, including improvements in health, education and lifetime earnings as well as changes in government revenue and expenditure. By accounting for these fiscal externalities in estimates of government net costs, Marginal Value of Public Funds can provide a more complete assessment of which programs generate the greatest public value.

This method also supports broader public finance reforms, including incorporating second-round fiscal effects and long-term value into budget planning.

Learning from Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework

Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework provides a useful model for incorporating avoided costs into funding decisions. The framework focuses on longer-term resource savings and fiscal benefits arising from early problem resolution, including indirect downstream effects such as reduced reliance on high-cost, extended-duration services across multiple government portfolios.²³

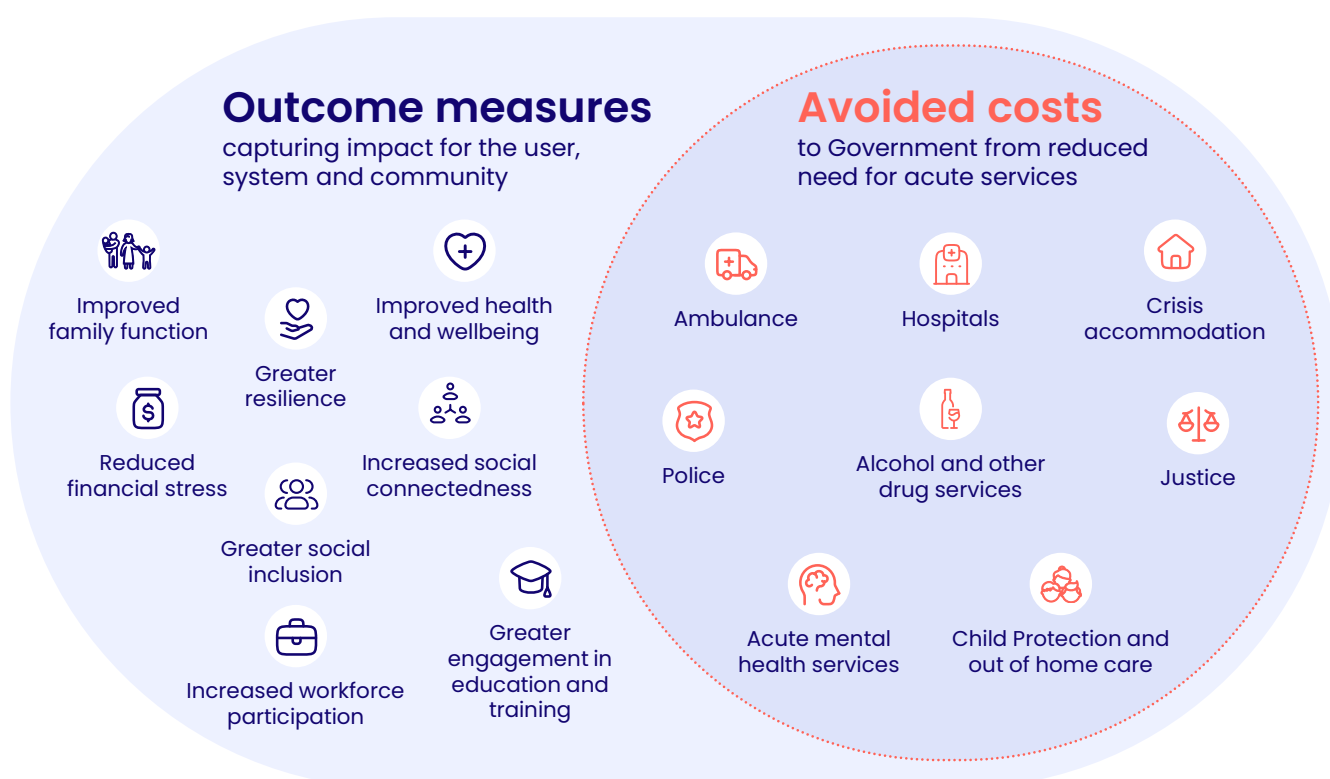
The framework requires all early intervention budget initiatives submitted to quantify:

- outcome measures showing the impact the proposal will have for both the system and clients, and
- estimates of the avoided cost to the Victorian Government from the reduction in use of services from the proposal.

To date, the Victorian Government has invested \$4.0 billion through the Early Intervention Investment Framework, with more than \$4.5 billion anticipated to be generated in economic and financial benefits of reduced acute service usage, all the while achieving strong outcomes for participants.²⁴

Figure 2 illustrates potential avoided cost sources across service systems, demonstrating how a comprehensive second-round fiscal effects approach can guide public investment decisions by capturing value creation across traditional departmental boundaries. This approach shifts early childhood intervention from a departmental expense to a whole-of-government investment, improving resource allocation while maximising long-term value through the systematic prevention of costly downstream interventions.

Figure 2 | Examples of Outcomes and Avoided Costs for Early Intervention Investment Framework Initiatives.



Source: Department of Treasury and Finance, State of Victoria (2022).

Policy opportunities for NSW

NSW has opportunities to continue growing its capability in economic evaluation.

OPPORTUNITY 1

Strengthen longitudinal and cross-sector data systems

NSW, and Australia more broadly, have developed relatively strong administrative data assets by international standards. Linked data environments such as the NSW Human Services Dataset, NSW Health Record Linkage System and the national Multi-Agency Data Integration Project provide important foundations for evaluating social programs.

Practical constraints remain when using such data to assess the long-term value of early childhood interventions. While many relevant datasets exist, linking them consistently across sectors, jurisdictions and time periods remains challenging.²⁵ As a result, it is often difficult to follow children's outcomes across the full range of systems in which early interventions may generate benefits, including health, education, social services and justice.

NSW has already recognised the need for better data linkages and cross-sector coordination but reducing fragmentation will require stronger cooperation between state and federal governments.²⁶ Two actions stand out:

- **Expand cross-system data linkages:** Expanding linkages between state program datasets and key Commonwealth systems, such as Medicare, the National Disability Insurance Scheme and income support data, would enable analysts to track children's long-term outcomes across the services where the benefits of early intervention often emerge.
- **Improve access and analytical use of existing data:** Many relevant datasets already exist, including linked health, education, child protection, justice, Medicare, NDIS and income-support data, but remain underused for program evaluation due to complex access arrangements, fragmented governance and limited analytical resourcing. Streamlining approval processes for data access, establishing clearer governance frameworks and investing in dedicated analytical capability would enable agencies to make greater use of existing linked datasets.

OPPORTUNITY 2

Embed evaluation capability across government

NSW has taken important steps to strengthen capability in recent years. Initiatives such as the NSW Treasury Centre for Economic Evidence already provide training, guidance and analytical tools to support better policy analysis across government. Similarly, the Expert Advisor Network helps agencies access specialist evaluation expertise.

These initiatives provide a strong foundation, but there is an opportunity to extend evaluation capability more systematically across agencies. Rather than relying primarily on central teams, agencies could develop stronger internal capability to design evaluations, interpret results and commission high-quality analytical work.

One approach would be to establish dedicated evaluation leads across teams. Staff would not necessarily conduct all analysis themselves but would ensure evaluation is built into program design, coordinate analytical work and connect agencies with central expertise or external research partners.

Partnerships with universities, independent evaluators and research organisations can further support this model. Co-designed evaluations give agency staff hands-on experience while producing useful findings. Shared analytical tools reduce the burden on individual teams and promote consistency across government.

Evaluation needs to be embedded as part of policy development and program delivery, rather than treated as an optional or end-of-program activity. This requires clear expectations from leadership that programs will be evaluated and that findings will inform decisions about program design, continuation or scaling.

Over time, strengthening both analytical capability and institutional incentives for evidence use would help ensure that evaluation becomes a routine part of government decision-making, supporting more informed investment in early intervention programs.

OPPORTUNITY 3

Promote regulatory experimentation and adaptive policymaking

Programs are sometimes implemented at scale without strong evidence. Once established, they can be difficult to reform or discontinue due to political commitments, vested interests and institutional risk aversion. This dynamic can entrench underperforming policies, erode public trust when outcomes fall short and crowd out more effective alternatives. While stakeholder concerns about risk and unintended consequences are valid, they can also inhibit evidence-based decision-making, leading governments to sustain ineffective programs rather than adapt and improve.

The NSW Government could require pilot testing for new or expanded programs above a defined funding threshold, with agencies expected to demonstrate an evidence strategy as part of program funding submissions. Where feasible, agencies should use randomised controlled trials and, where not, they should apply robust quasi-experimental methods, such as difference-in-differences or regression discontinuity (which allow assessment of causal effects), to establish causal impact.

These approaches generate credible, context-specific evidence and help policymakers avoid committing to reforms that may be ineffective or costly. NSW Treasury could issue guidance and provide oversight to ensure methodological quality and consistency.

To strengthen accountability, agencies could specify decision rules upfront in their advice to government. This should include clear, measurable criteria for scaling, modifying or discontinuing a program. Embedding these criteria in Cabinet processes would reduce the risk that evidence is set aside when it is inconvenient.

An experimental approach reframes how policy is developed. Rather than treating implementation as a one-off decision, it embeds programs within continuous improvement cycles, testing new approaches while systematically reviewing existing initiatives. This enables more rigorous assessment of program viability, iterative design refinement based on performance data and adaptive responses to changing conditions.

Combining experimental approaches with economic evaluation can enhance public trust. Programs that demonstrate effectiveness and value for money can be scaled with greater confidence, while underperforming initiatives can be redesigned or discontinued. Importantly, publishing evaluation results, where appropriate, would further reinforce transparency and accountability, helping to sustain support across electoral cycles and administrative transitions.

OPPORTUNITY 4

Incorporate avoided costs and second-round fiscal effects into budget processes

Current budget frameworks privilege short-term costs over long-term returns. By focusing on upfront expenditure and first-round fiscal impacts, they systematically undervalue prevention and early intervention even when these approaches could deliver substantial downstream savings.²⁷ This creates a structural bias toward reactive spending, where crisis responses appear more affordable than investments that reduce future demand.

Preventive interventions, particularly in areas such as early childhood education, housing and health, can generate large avoided costs over time. However, these benefits often accrue across portfolios and over long-time horizons, meaning they are not captured under existing budget rules. As a result, agencies face weak incentives to invest in measures that deliver system-wide savings.

NSW should strengthen budget processes to systematically capture long-term fiscal value. This could include requiring departments and agencies, in budget proposals, to quantify second-round fiscal effects: the downstream savings that arise from reduced demand for remedial services. Avoided-cost modelling should be standard practice in business cases, with agencies required to present not only program costs but also expected reductions in future demand.

To address cross-portfolio incentives, Treasury could introduce a whole-of-government assessment requirement for major proposals, ensuring that benefits accruing to other portfolios are recognised in funding decisions. This would reduce disincentives for agencies to invest in reforms where costs and benefits are distributed unevenly across government.

Costing timeframes could also be extended for relevant policy areas. For programs with long-term impacts, such as early childhood, preventive health and housing, NSW could extend costing horizons from 10 years to up to 25 years.²⁸ This would better align budget decisions with the timing of benefits realisation, avoiding the systematic undervaluing of early intervention.

OPPORTUNITY 5

Integrate Marginal Value of Public Funds into policymaking

NSW could also pilot the use of Marginal Value of Public Funds analysis for selected major policy proposals. Unlike conventional costings, Marginal Value of Public Funds considers both the benefits delivered to individuals and the net cost to government after accounting for downstream fiscal effects such as avoided service demand, increased tax revenues and reduced transfer payments. This would provide decision-makers with a more comprehensive assessment of whether public expenditure generates value for the community over the long term.

Implementing these changes would require clear methodological standards. NSW Treasury should establish guidance on acceptable evaluation methods, evidence thresholds and approaches to managing risks such as double counting. This would support more credible and comparable estimates while maintaining fiscal discipline.

The path forward: from evidence to action

NSW has many of the foundations in place: effective early childhood intervention programs and a well-developed evaluation infrastructure. The missing piece is consistent economic evaluation evidence. While government often knows which programs improve outcomes, it is less able to demonstrate which deliver the greatest value for money. This constrains its ability to scale what works, prioritise funding, retire underperforming initiatives and make a compelling case for prevention in budget processes.

Early childhood intervention has strong potential to generate **high social and economic returns**

The barriers include fragmented data, long time horizons, hard-to-measure benefits and budget rules that favour short-term thinking. However, there are opportunities to address these. NSW can strengthen its evidence base through embedding economic evaluation, improving data integration and reforming budget processes to support more disciplined, transparent decision-making.

There is a clear payoff: resources directed to programs that demonstrably deliver value, greater accountability to taxpayers and more durable policy settings over time. Early childhood intervention has strong potential to generate high social and economic returns. Realising that potential depends not just on what government funds, but on its ability to measure, compare and act on evidence of what works best.



Annex A. NSW Early childhood intervention programs with economic evaluation evidence

Some programs listed did not originate in NSW or are not NSW-specific but have been extended to the state as part of a broader national or multi-jurisdictional initiatives, for example, the Family Wellbeing Program and early intervention services for children with disability.

PROGRAM		
Family Preservation Program/Family Functional Therapy – Child Welfare (FFT-CW)	DESCRIPTION	The Family Preservation program supports families with children aged 0 to 17 years (or expecting a baby) who are experiencing challenges in caring for their children, with the primary goal of helping them remain safely at home and preventing unnecessary placement in out-of-home care.
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	An annual investment of around \$150 million over 10 years is expected to generate \$1.6 billion in net savings, with costs recovered by the fifth year (Social Ventures Australia, 2019). For the FFT-CW, over the next two years, the program is projected not only to recover its costs but also to result in net avoided expenditures ranging from \$11 million to \$15 million (NSW Government, 2022).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
Kids Early Years Network	DESCRIPTION	Designed to enhance collaboration and overcome systemic challenges, including limited service access, fragmented coordination among providers and the absence of effective feedback mechanisms. Families engage with their chosen lead service provider, who then coordinates with other services within the network on their behalf.
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	A \$1 investment is expected to yield savings to government of \$2.54 (the mid point of a range from \$0.70 to \$4.38) (NSW Government, 2022).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
Closing the Gap in Early Childhood / Family Wellbeing program	DESCRIPTION	The Australian Government is investing in better access to quality early childhood education for First Nations children through community-led, government partnerships that support culturally appropriate care and development.
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	Every dollar invested in the Family Wellbeing program in Yarrabah (2001–2021) generated \$4.80 in benefits for participants and the community (Deloitte Access Economics, 2022).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Education
Early intervention services for children with disability	DESCRIPTION	Early intervention provides specialised support for young children with a disability or learning needs and their families, helping promote development and participation in daily life.
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	A national study commissioned by the AEIOU Foundation estimated that providing effective early intervention for children with autism delivers net economic benefits of \$1.15 million (moderate) and \$1.25 million (severe) per child. These savings benefit both the individual and the wider community (Synergies Economic Consulting, 2016).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Education

Annex A. NSW Early childhood intervention programs with economic evaluation evidence

PROGRAM		
Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)	DESCRIPTION	Triple P is a parenting support program with five levels of increasing intensity, designed to improve parenting skills and reduce the risk of child maltreatment and behavioural or emotional problems in children (from 0 to 16 years old).
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	The analysis showed that the intervention would cover its costs if it prevented at least 1.5% of conduct disorder cases and would generate net savings if it prevented 7% or more (Wise et al. 2005).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
Family Connect and Support	DESCRIPTION	Family Connect and Support helps vulnerable children, young people and families find local support services. It helps them get the right help early to avoid problems becoming worse.
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	The benefit-cost ratio for Family Connect and Support (FCS) ranges from 1.1 to 4.9. This means that for every dollar spent, the program returns between \$1.10 and \$4.90 in social benefits (Research Centre for Children and Families, University of Sydney, 2024).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Communities and Justice
Early Childhood Education and Care Services	DESCRIPTION	The Early Childhood Education Directorate (ECED) oversees and supports early childhood education services in NSW. They work to make sure children from birth to school age get high-quality education. The NSW Department of Education manages over 6,000 early education and after-school care services across the state.
	ECONOMIC EVALUATION OUTCOME	The total government savings are estimated between \$1.6 billion and \$1.9 billion. After an initial setup period, the program starts saving money for the government each year. The program has a public benefit-cost ratio of at least \$2.69 saved for every \$1 spent (PwC, 2014).
	DEPARTMENT	NSW Department of Education

Note: The Department field names the NSW Government department responsible for, or associated with, implementing the program in NSW. It is not necessarily the department that commissioned or conducted the economic evaluation. Some programs draw on national or state-level evaluations, including evaluations of similar programs in other jurisdictions.

Annex B. NSW Early childhood intervention programs with established and limited economic evaluation evidence

Programs	Evidence: Efficacy	Evidence: Economic Evaluation
Families First – Families NSW – Brighter Futures – Keep Them Safe – Targeted Earlier Intervention (current)	Yes ★★★★★	Yes
Miller Early Childhood Sustained Home-Visiting/ Maternal Early Childhood Sustained Home-Visiting	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Nurse Family Partnership or Australian Nurse- Family Partnership Program	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Munch & Move	Yes ★☆☆☆☆	Limited
Sustaining NSW Families or Sustained Health Home Visiting Program	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Brighter Futures and Youth Hope Programs – Family Preservation Program	Yes ★☆☆☆☆	Yes
Their Futures Matter (note: found to be ineffective, discontinued)	–	Limited
Family Start Package	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare	Yes ★☆☆☆☆	Yes
Closing the Gap in Early Childhood	Yes ★★★★★	Yes
First Five Years Program/Brighter Beginnings	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Start Strong program (For Preschool Children) – Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Mobile Preschools	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
NSW Disability and Inclusion Program	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Early Childhood Intervention Services/Early Intervention Services for Children with Disability (with NDIS)	Yes ★★★★★	Yes
Positive Parenting Program	Yes ★★★★★	Yes
Support at Home for Early Language and Literacy	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Baby Happiness, Understanding, Giving, and Sharing Program	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Good Beginnings and Save the Children Australia	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Early Intervention Parenting Project	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Home Start	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Illawarra Extended Families Temporary Family Care Program	–	Limited
Best Beginnings Service (WA and NSW)	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Family Support Program/Family Connect and Support/ Kids Early Years	Yes ★★★★★	Yes
Special Neighbours	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
New Parent Infant Network	Yes ★★★★★	Limited
Early Childhood Education and Care Services	Yes ★★★★★	Yes
Stronger Families and Communities Strategy/ Strong Family, Strong Communities	Yes ★★★★★	Limited

Note: The star ratings indicate: Strong evidence to suggest effectiveness (3 stars); Moderate evidence to suggest effectiveness (2 stars); Emerging evidence to suggest effectiveness (1 star) (NSW Department of Health, Brighter Beginnings: The First 2000 Days of Life, 2021) (NSW Department of Health, 2021).

Endnotes

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