



connect
Children and Families

Annual Report 2021-2022



'Community' by Krubi Creative — Commissioned by Connect in 2021

Connect Child and Family Services team acknowledge the Dharug and Gundungurra people, the First Peoples where we work and play. We respect and acknowledge their Elders past and present. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.



Chair message

I am honoured to have recently taken up the role of Chair of the Connect Board. The role has been very ably held by Alexandra (Ali) Payne since Robert Crowe stepped off the Board in November 2021, having led Connect for 10 years.

Ali's keen attention to the performance of Connect, her collaborative leadership of the Board and her support of the executive was remarkable. As the interim CEO, I was fortunate to work with Ali while we recruited for the role. I enjoyed her guidance, knowledge and reflective practice which enabled me to identify opportunities for improved performance and to work with the Board to select our new CEO Ann-Marie Elliott.

Ann-Marie brings a depth of knowledge and experience in the design and evaluation of children's services and has led innovative practice internationally and in her previous role at Connect. I know that Ann-Marie will lead Connect based on the values that she has developed with the team and the Board so that the community, families and children benefit from the relationship with Connect over the coming years. I am very much looking forward to working with the Board and the executive to continue Connect's tradition of strong community relationships and high quality service.

Rosemary Bishop
Board Chair, November 2022

CEO message

Writing the Annual Report is always a time of reflection, considering the successes of the year that's been and what could have been done differently. This year feels unlike any other we have experienced as an organisation. As NSW locked down in July 2021, we stayed open and managed all the changes to the way we worked needed to do that. When there had been hope that COVID has passed as the year ended, the more infectious variant – Omnicom – circulated, and for the first time we saw positive Covid cases in our Connect community, with little known about what 2022 would bring.

Our teams were on the front line of this pandemic at every stage, doing all they could to keep the world consistent and predictable for children in their care, even though the world felt very uncertain for adults. They looked after each other, following numerous rules and supported each other as a team. Our teams leaned into our organisational values to support them in the many decisions they faced along the way. I am immensely proud of my colleagues' commitment to children and families and their passion, tenacity and resilience to keep going.

It also strikes me that despite this tumultuous year, we have achieved so much. You will see in this report how we took the investment from our Board and made sustainable projects — enabling a Culturally Safe place our collaborators at the Blue Mountains Aboriginal Cultural Resource Centre, enhancing pathways for families to access early intervention and support through Best Start and supporting the professional development of our Educators through practitioner research initiative – Connect ED - which led us to present at the national Australasian Journal of Early Education Conference. Our NDIS service went through its mid-term audit and passed with flying colours and we committed to being a Child Safe Organisation.

I am incredibly grateful to our Board of Directors, past and present, who have guided the organisation through unprecedented times and supported our ability to be responsive to the changing needs of our community and our team. They give their time freely and shoulder a huge responsibility and that is a testament to their commitment to our community.

We are starting 2022-2023 with a new structure and a renewed focus on supporting families to access services that respond to their needs, creating pathways both across our services, and to other community agencies that can support them. This year has taught us more than ever that we need to work together to face the challenges ahead and to create the world we want for our children.

Ann-Marie Elliott
Chief Executive, November 2022



Our Culture

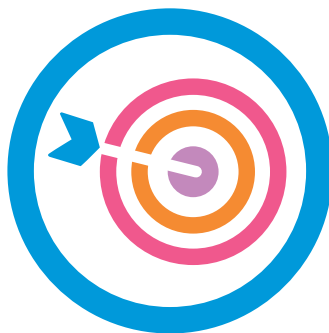
In October 2021, our Board endorsed the changes to our organisational Values, Purpose and Vision statements. The development of these has been a process over 12 months, across the organisation, to deeply reflect on: what is important to us as an organisation, why we come to work each day and what we are working towards.

We are a values driven organisation, with these values underpinning the decisions and direction we take toward the vision we have collectively defined.



Values

We tune in, connect and are kind, strive for social justice, walk together and celebrate every child.



Purpose

Together, we support children's and families' learning, safety and wellbeing.



Vision

Children and families thrive in safe, connected communities



We Walk Together

Connect has a strong commitment to Reconciliation and this is articulated in our organisational value of “Walk Together”. An outcome from our first Reconciliation Action Plan was to gain funding to ensure an embedded approach to Elders being involved in our programs and to ensure appropriate remuneration for their knowledge and time.

A successful application through NSW Department of Education has provided the funding to strengthen our work with Blue Mountains Aboriginal Community Resource Centre (BMACRC) and Uncle Lex Dadd. This funding allows for BMACRC to provide Cultural guidance to Connect and for Uncle Lex to spend regular time in our Early Childhood Centres as our Dharug teacher. Uncle Lex’s visits are always a highlight for both children and our staff teams. These regular visits allow for authentic relationships to occur and knowledge and understandings to be built over time.

It’s important for Connect that respect and value of Aboriginal Knowledges, Languages and Cultures is an embedded part of our curriculum, not just content we visit once or twice a year. We thank Uncle Lex and the Blue Mountains Aboriginal Cultural Resource Centre for so generously sharing Knowledges, Languages and Cultures with our Connect community.

“I love coming in and seeing the kids smile when I arrive. I share Culture and Knowledge and sing songs with them on my ukulele about “Sky Juice” and in Dharug Language. All the educators at the Connect centres are lovely and friendly. They are always open to knowledge I share. I’ve made each centre a set of tapping sticks during my visits, making stuff with kids is something I really enjoy. Doing this work in Early Childhood Centres is really rewarding. I see the kids once they get older and they remember me and things I taught them when they were little.”

Uncle Lex, Dharug Teacher



We All Walk Together.



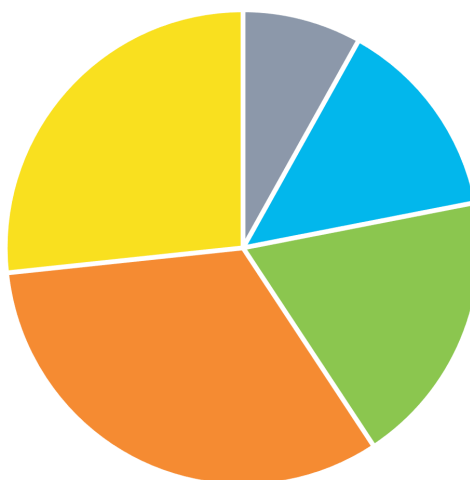
Our People

102 employees

79% live in the Blue Mountains LGA

43% have worked with Connect for more than 5 years

88%
female
workforce



0-20 21-30 31-40 41-51 51+

Age profile

Our Workforce, our future

Trainees at Connect are invaluable, they make work better for everyone, they have fresh eyes, ask questions and give our teams a chance to share their knowledge and expertise with the next generation, as well as improving our ratios and supervision of children. We asked some of our trainees to share their experience with us and this is what they told us...



QUESTION	EMILY	CHANTAE	LAUREN	LOREN
1. When did you leave school?	I stayed in school for the duration of my traineeship but graduated recently in 2022	I left school in December 2021	I graduated high school and completed my HSC in 2016.	I left school after completing year 10 last year.
2. What drew you to early childhood?	My elder sister had completed her Cert III in Early Childhood Education and care and followed on with her Diploma shortly after. I followed her studies with a great deal of interest and held an enthusiastic approach to following the same path. Working as a babysitter and being one of the eldest in a sea of many siblings and cousins I became really involved in the communication and relationships with children in my life. This was also something that drew me towards working in early childhood.	I grew up around children when I was younger, so I had that gifted nature around them and around my nieces and nephews.	I have always had a natural passion for caring for children. For me, beginning a career in Early Childhood was the natural next step. This has allowed me to refine my passion into a professional skill.	I have always had a big love for children. Working with children is my biggest passion in life. Children are the light in this world, and they bring so much joy to our lives, they make me so happy. I'm so blessed to be able to work with them every day. I'm beyond grateful, it's a dream come true for me
3. What do you like about working at Connect?	Connect is one of the friendliest and supportive work environments I've ever worked in. It's been really comforting having this as my first "proper" job. The people here have really helped with the transition of school life/ childhood to the workforce/ adulthood. It doesn't think I could have chosen a better place to work and I'm so incredibly grateful to have been a part of this team for the past two years.	I Love the people and the community. Everyone is so nice and supportive in the workplace.	Connect cares about quality. I love coming to work knowing that my leaders care about the quality of our program, our service, our resources and environment, our staff and how we care for children and families. I feel supported by my team to complete my qualification and have been given beyond average hours of study time to achieve this goal. Connect empowers young trainees and encourages them to use their unique abilities to contribute to the outcome of our program and to make meaningful connections with children and families.	Connect is such a wholesome service. I feel right at home coming to work every day. The love and support Connect give is truly amazing. My connect colleagues are my second family. I love having a sense of belonging.
4. What are you thinking about your future career?	My career has been something that I've put more thought and effort into than a lot of people my age. As of 2023, I will be enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Science (Child and Community). Focusing largely on family violence and support work in early childhood. I was going to use being an Early Childhood Educator as a pathway to learning about child development and as time went on, I realised it was something I was very passionate about, as well as working in family violence and support. I fully intend on keeping an educator role for as long as I possibly can, alongside my other role as an early intervention officer.	I still see myself working in early childhood for a long time and in the future. I aim to be more confident as a person in the workplace and finding a way to make kids excited about what I do as an Aboriginal woman and how we can do better.	In my future, I see myself continuing in my Early Childhood career with Connect as a Diploma qualified Educator. I also hope to complete my Early Childhood Teacher degree through university to increase my understanding of education in the early years.	I definitely want to stay in early childhood education, my plan is to work my way up, so once I complete my cert III I would love to do my Diploma.
5. What would you say to someone considering a work traineeship at Connect?	Do it! Do it! This traineeship has been one of the best decisions I've made and despite all the bumps and challenges in the road, I've had the most supportive team behind me encouraging me every step of the way. I am so appreciative of everything that connect has done for me and my career, I couldn't have done it without them. I owe a lot to this place. If you're passionate about what you want to do - go for it! Connect will communicate, support, and advise when you need it. It will be one of the best choices you ever make.	I would say do it! Because when I started working here, I felt so much happiness and laughter. And I would say that everyone is so friendly and funny.	I would highly recommend that anyone who is passionate about Early Childhood considers a traineeship with Connect- if your goal is to become a quality early childhood educator, Connect will empower you and provide you with the resources to reach your goal. You will be supported, valued and encouraged here.	I would say that it's an amazing opportunity. It's full of loving and supportive people and everyone is so understanding. You're never alone, everyone's always so smiley and always checking in. You learn so much, Connect is one of a kind!



We are fortunate to have a very consistent staff base, with 43% of our team having worked at Connect for more than five years. This is important for the relationship based work we do. There are many team members who have worked with Connect for ten or more years, and this year we would like to acknowledge the stand outs — Lise and Kate who have worked in our sector continuously for 40 and 35 years respectively. An amazing display of commitment to children and families and our community — thank you! Here's what they had to say when they reflected on their achievement...

Lise Nielsen **Hazelwood Educator — 40 years service**

What has sustained you in your role over the years?

I have always felt very privileged, to be part of the Hazelwood Team, families and the community, they are like my second family. I feel, I have a commitment to the children I care for, and believe continuity of educators, have positive outcomes for our children's development and emotional security — it's one of the many reasons I have stayed so long at Hazelwood. I love the children's enthusiasm for learning, to develop their many skills, which never fails to surprise me, their energy, exploration, expression and ability, to engage in positive and mindful play with their peers, are always amazing to observe, and be part of.

What is the favourite part of your role?

I love walking through the door each morning, being met by smiling faces, from team members and children, such a positive start to my day. I treasure my time with our children, love to engage in long conversations, during their play experiences. Children have so much to say, and contribute to their day at Hazelwood. I love observing the children, building close friendships with their peers, and to see them grow and develop their social, emotional and communication skills through play. There is nothing more rewarding, than watching their happy faces, as they engage in any play scenarios, I love their facial expression as they discuss their interest, make decisions and experience achievements with their peers. Our children know they are supported and have a voice at Hazelwood.

What gives me hope about the organisation and sector?

The fact, that we are being supported by the organisation... have open communication...have a voice...being respected and heard...given opportunities, for further studies within our services. I am hopeful, that the early childhood sector will keep on becoming stronger, and early childhood educators will get recognition, for the very important role they play in children's lives.

What's the one thing you would change about the sector?

It would be amazing to have more male educators, in the early childhood sector.

Kate Ellevsen **Connected Abilities and Best Start Key Worker/ Early Intervention Teacher — 35 years service**

What has sustained you in your role over the years?

The privilege of walking alongside families on their journey has always been strongly motivating and rewarding over the years. There is a lot of heart and soul in this work. There are a lot of laughs and a few tears which make for meaningful relationships with children, families and other professionals. Children are fun and funny which makes for many enjoyable interactions every day. Working as part of a fabulous team and alongside other committed individuals in the sector is an ongoing inspiration. The ability to work independently, flexibly and close to home has also been perfect for a work/life balance over many years.

What is the favourite part of your role?

The favourite part of my work is listening to families, sharing their stories and working together with them to support their children and their family life. Having been fortunate to share the journeys of many families, it is good to be able to bring what I have learned to conversations with other families so that together we can problem solve challenges. Playing with children remains a delight, particularly when this is shared with the people who love them.

What are the changes that you have seen whilst working in this role?

One major change in early childhood intervention, which occurred many years ago, was the shift from child centred to family centred practice. There was also a change from professionals being seen as having all the answers to professionals working collaboratively with families and recognising families as the experts on their own children. In recent years, the NDIS has brought massive changes to the whole sector and to the way we work with children and families.

What gives you hope about the future of the organisation and the sector?

There are many good and highly principled people who are drawn to our sector and to our organisation. I am hopeful that together, our optimism, enthusiasm and commitment will bring positive change for children, families and our community.



Three teams were able to successfully complete their research projects.

- *“Literacy amongst the leaves”* Lapstone Preschool - Rhonda Kasalo and Joanne Roe
- *“Reading to the crowd”* Possum Early Childhood Centre - Danielle Grosse and Macaila Passmore
- *“Climb high with literacy”* Possums Patch, Mount Victoria - Simone Chaffey and Jake Small
- Australian Children’s Education and Care Authority

Acknowledgements:

The Board of Connect Child and Family Services
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 Dr Andi Salamon
 Melissa Duffy-Fagan
 Jaydene Barnes
 Dr Nicole Leggett
 Lapstone Preschool
 Possum Early Childhood Centre
 Hazelwood Early Childhood Centre
 Possums Patch, Mount Victoria

Connect ED – professional development

The ConnectED Practitioner Research Project took place from June 2021 until May 2022.

The project was funded by Connect Child and Family Services’ Board as an innovative proposal. At time of proposing this project, Connect’s Early Childhood Centres were looking for an approach to meaningfully embed critical reflection within their practices. ACECQA* found that services that exceeded the National Quality Standards, among other indicators, had “An embedded culture of shared learning, critical reflection and commitment to continuous quality improvement that is seen across the team”. It had been observed that Connect educators had strong skills in reflective practice but were finding critical reflection challenging. To engage in critical reflection, educators needed to be able understand “Critical theories” such postmodernism and reflexivity. Educators often need access to professional learning to develop these higher-level skills.

Connect knew of Associate Professor Christine Woodrow (Western Sydney University) and Associate Professor Linda Newman’s (University of Newcastle) work in the field of facilitating practitioner research in early childhood centres both within Australia and abroad. After early discussions, implementing a practitioner research model seemed an exciting and innovative approach to support Connect’s Early Childhood Education teams.

Once funding was approved, research teams were chosen from each centre. The teams were given professional learning and were guided in the practitioner research model by Associate Professor Woodrow and Associate Professor Newman over six sessions which included a conference day and five leadership round tables. Professional learning included exploring professional identities, intentional teaching, literacy learning and the five literacy keys and critical reflection practice. Each team then used this learning to guide a research project in their centre. The teams were also supported by mentoring sessions with members of Connect’s senior leadership team, which included Angela Gillespie and Ann-Marie Elliott.

The implementation of this project has had key impacts on Connect Child and Family Services. Utilising a practitioner research model has been a pivotal practice in how Connect’s Early Childhood Centres embed not only critical reflection, but also Educational Leadership. We now view our educational leaders as Lead Practice Researchers. We have also been able to identify the dispositions that support our leaders to effectively guide their teams.

The project was a great success, and the teams completed their projects to an impressive standard. There were other unexpected benefits of the project:

- Job descriptions for Educational Leaders that include practitioner research as key to their role
- Promotion of this type of professional development would help us recruit staff in a tight labour market
- Sharing our learning at two national conferences and collaborating on an academic journal article.

These are not the most important changes for us. What we have seen because of this project is more curiosity, a permission to ask questions and it has illuminated that leadership at Connect is about being **learners not knowers**.

From an organisational perspective, this is the type of professional development is transformative. It has captured staff voices and children’s voices and we know we can use this model to better understand our community’s perspectives.

It is creating experiences for children that are deeply intentional and engaging. This will project will inform our professional development approach going forward and how we understand all our leadership positions.

To create this opportunity required investment and trust, and we acknowledge our Board of Directors to giving us both those things. It also required a great deal of effort, and our Operations Manager Angela Gillespie has been the driving force of this project and we are particularly grateful for her passion and leadership.

Our Practice and Programs

Creating integrated and place-based supports

'Place-based' is defined as an approach that involves bringing people together, such as a school or wider community, to address complex local needs by harnessing the vision, resources and opportunities in the community. We know within Connect and our partners, there are invaluable resources that can be better used to address and respond to our community needs.

We have been involved, as a partner agency, in successful place-based collective impact work and know what a difference this makes to community.

Working together, listening to multiple voices, utilising diverse lenses, allows us to be more aware of when we need to tread softly in community. Tapping into collective community experience and knowledge, serves to make our teams more well-rounded, empathic, and better skilled.

When Connect's funding began to shift many years ago, more funding silos appeared and it made it increasingly difficult to work in an integrated way. This was a real loss that has been felt across the organisation, as we know we are better for working and sharing together. We have begun to reflect on ways Connect programs can work differently with each other and the community, and also what support and resources are needed to help our programs be able to mesh together. We know that families experience of community today, is different to previous generations' experience and we also know what happens when families and children don't experience support and belonging in the early years.

The research tells us integrated and interagency approaches that aim to address the multiple ecological factors that impact upon children and families simultaneously are needed. We also know that programs that allow universal access in community places better address vulnerabilities - so it's been fantastic to hear announcements about increased early childhood education funding from both state and federal governments. Many of Connect's programs have long worked on the notion of being place-based, supporting strong connections to local schools and other community spaces; allowing lengths of time for trust, security and familiarity to build between children, families and workers. I'd like to acknowledge the various partners in the community who have worked with us to achieve these outcomes.

Our vision for place-based integration includes Child Safe spaces that encompass all aspects of safety and wellbeing for children, including inclusion and cultural safety. Guiding our work in this area is this quote from Rakap & Parlak-Rakap:

"Full participation, full membership, valued citizenship"

If we can assess our practices and meet those outcomes, I think we'll be doing ok.

Angela Gillespie, Connect Senior Manager Practice and Programs



We work across four areas with interconnected components — all focused on children at the centre of our decision making, as illustrated below.

• **Connect Early:**

- Supported Playgroups, Family Support programs, Transition to School Groups, Best Start project, Early Learning Program

• **Connected Abilities:**

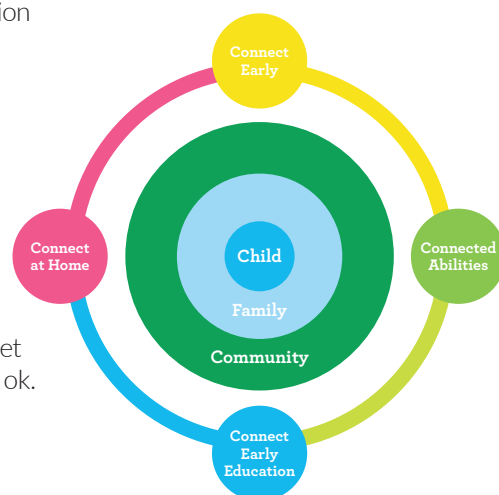
- Developmental Supports; NDIS Support Coordination, Keyworkers and Allied Health - Lapstone and Hazelbrook branches

• **Connect At Home:**

- Connect at Home Project
- We CAN

• **Connect Early Education:**

- Lapstone Preschool
- Hazelwood ECC
- Possum ECC
- Possums Patch, Mount Victoria





Connected Abilities

Our Team and Collaborators

Our staff team of 14 professionals, have consistently maintained the support of approximately 150 families and 165 children accessing the NDIS scheme, and continue to offer multidisciplinary support within their homes, preschools, schools, and the community.

Our relationships with community networks continue to grow such as with the Child and Adolescent Development Unit, Blue Mountains City Council, Penrith City Council, Wesley Mission, Nepean Child and Development Unit, Department of Education, Catholic Ed and Westmead Hospital. We also are building relationships with providers in our region such as Belong Blue Mountains, Thrive, NADO, Wellspace Australia, Luke Priddis Foundation, NORO Music Therapy, Chatterbox SP and OT Services, Road to Recovery, Able2, Lifestart, and KU Services. We continue to develop relationships within the community by attending training sessions and liaising with specialists, doctors, and therapists along with networking with other providers and organisations in the Penrith and Blue Mountains region.

Our Work During 2021-22

The needs of our children and families remained regardless of COVID. As much of our work is based on schools sites, we had to adapt to schools being closed and use alternative options for face to face and virtual support sessions in response to families' preferences. This included switching to telepractice sessions, providing Home Learning Packs to assist families to use resources to meet children's needs in a flexible way, and creating new supports such as video recordings, lunches, family games, online school learning help, coordination of support by meeting with teachers. We have maintained telepractice as a form of service delivery, so that we have more avenues to engage and connect with children and their families.

Our Review

We continue to reflect on and evaluate our practices and we completed our Mid Term Audit in January 2022 as part of our registration as an NDIS approved provider. Having passed that external assessment, we focused our energy on an internal review of our NDIS funded operations. As a result of this, we have developed a Business Plan 2022-23 which focusses on quality improvement in our systems and new service offers for our community. Our team, which prior to the restructure was operating as two teams, has now come together with a shared vision for integrated services across Connect.

The Year Ahead

We strive to have a greater use of resources, a stronger and responsive support team, and a wider variety of delivery models to meet the changing needs of families all year round with high levels of inclusion, participation and relationship building. We are seeking to continue to grow the team to be able to meet the needs of children in our community.

"Connect is a wonderful service, it has helped our little girl who has Autism and is non verbal to have a voice. The keyworker has helped us with behavioural challenges, play skills, feeding, toileting; the support has been child and family centred in our home, childcare and community settings"

Connected Abilities — Mum



Connect Early Education



Across our four centres, we have supported 407 children in 341 families to access early childhood education in the Blue Mountains

Possum Early Childhood Centre

The Possum team engaged in a big year of professional learning and development, this has led to many wonderful changes at Possum in 2021-2022. After our practitioner research project based on dialogic reading, we analysed the research and embarked on an assessment of our indoor learning environment. We wanted to create a free-flowing space that allowed children to create their own play and learning in a natural and authentic way.

As a team we planned our classroom layout, gathered feedback from the children and researched the equipment and resources that we needed to make the changes. We used a big part of our start strong funding to replace shelving, home corner equipment, mats and purchase additional opened materials. We looked at our routine and how that plays into children's learning, we discovered how much more engaged the children were by focusing on spontaneous small group experiences of interest throughout the day as they arose.

We now use the "yarning circle" as a gathering and belonging experience and have longer blocks of play for the remainder of the day.

In May, Danielle and Macaila attended the Early Childhood Australia Reconciliation Symposium in Darwin, they returned with so much inspiration and drive to make change in our community. The experience was one that they will never forget and were so grateful to be given the opportunity. Danielle has said *"it's life changing, everyone should be able to experience the symposium at least once"*.

Possums Patch, Mount Victoria

This year has been the year of community for Possum's Patch. Covid 19 impacted our small community and our team rose to this challenge and once again innovated their practice. This included providing resources for families to go bush walking in our beautiful national parks as well as craft materials packs to continue learning at home. It was truly wonderful to stay connected with our beautiful families during the lockdown period.

Sadly, we farewelled long time educators Jake and Vicki M. Jake, to go to another Connect centre closer to home and Vicki, to begin a well-earned retirement (although we still persuade her to come and play every now and then). We also welcomed some new faces to the team, Karen Daniels, Jessica Hendy, Hannah Chaffey and Willow Jackson. Many of our team are currently undergoing further study and we are proud that Connect supports ongoing professional learning.

A big change for our service this year is how we implement our critical reflection at Possum's Patch the impact it now has on our service working together as a team to critically reflect on our service, our environment, and our community. We have had some great mini projects in the preschool room from the Titanic, this included science experiments and construction. There were lots of conversations including the odd debate on *What happened to titanic once it did sink? Did it turn into a coral reef or did they take the Titanic to Museum?* Our love of building construction eventually took over, not only the room, but also our art wall became story of all their fabulous creations.

We have made the most of this wet weather climate this year and have bought rain suits so the children can continue to enjoy our fabulous yard and to explore their great interest of the outdoors, particularly climbing, swinging from the trees and slackline, no matter the weather.



Connect Early Education



Lapstone Preschool

This year we continued to reflect on ways to reduce barriers to inclusion and improve access for all children attending Lapstone Preschool. This resulted in reflecting on our daily practices, physical spaces and educator interactions. We now have a curriculum which is designed to facilitate open ended experiences in which all children can be included, regardless of their developmental stage. This is supported by loose parts resources and consistency of the environment allowing children to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct materials, revisiting ideas and consolidating. Children's critical thinking skills are engaged through inquiry-based learning, encouraging children to process through logical reasoning and concrete problem solving.

As a team we continued to reflected on our environment to support all children at Lapstone Preschool. Our second classroom, which was previously used exclusively for children enrolled in our Early Development Program, was transformed to our "Bush Kinder Base Camp" and provides access to our rear outdoor space which can be enjoyed by everyone. This new space has allowed for children to work together in smaller groups both indoors and outdoors with the vision to utilising Darks Common for the next stage of our journey "bush kinder adventures".

The rear shed used for storage of files has been cleaned out, a large table was donated from one of our preschool families and we now have a wonderful tinkering shed for the children to construct and deconstruct, explore clay, weave and just enjoy the serenity of the less busy backyard.

We have been able to participate in some wonderful professional development, including attending the Reconciliation Symposium in Darwin and participating in the Practitioner Action Research Project, as well as some inspirational in-house learning. It is through opportunities such as these that educators have been inspired to be brave in their future vision for our Preschool. We have a team of dedicated Educators who inspire children to be the best version of themselves everyday as we learn together.

Hazelwood Early Childhood Centre

The Hazelwood team has spent time deeply reflecting on what practices they do well and the future direction of the centre. This has led the development of a new philosophy and changes to how the physical environment is utilised.

The philosophy was developed over several team meetings, digging into our personal values, and building our shared understandings of how we work together each day at Hazelwood. This firm understanding of practice has led us to be very considerate of our physical environment.

You will now find each room with a growing collection of high-quality open-ended resources which are played with in the most the creative ways. We've loved watching how inventive and innovative each child at Hazelwood is. Our library has developed considerably too, with a focus on Aboriginal stories and stories that foster imagination and a love of reading. We also were able to apply to the Community Building Partnership fund to redevelop our outdoor space to allow for children's learning and curiosity to fostered in a more natural environment.

In January, Abbey Milsom joined our team first as Educational Leader and being appointed as Director in July 2022. We'd like to acknowledge and thank Rachelle McCoy and Nicole Boothroyd for their leadership of Hazelwood over this year as well.

Like much of the sector, there were some challenges with staffing, but we have recruited passionate educators who strengthen our amazing team. Life and leadership is truly a team effort and our progress over the last 12 months is a credit to all our educators.



Connect Early

Connect appreciates the continued support of our funder Wentwest and their ongoing understanding of our role and work with families in our community and well as the schools we work in and all of the amazing organisations that partner in the support our families, this includes Salvation Army Lethbridge Park, Blacktown Area Community Centre (BACC).



Little Possums

This year was an exciting and challenging one for our Little Possums Team. We were thrilled that COVID restrictions eased enough for us to be allowed back into schools and to work with our beautiful children and their families face to face.

Our Aboriginal Mentor Karen, was alongside families providing advocacy, practical assistance, emotional support along with so many other things that support children's development, welfare and education. The Aboriginal Mentor Role requires flexibility, deep listening and the ability to build bridges between people, communities and other services. Karen continues to work in this way in communities now navigating the emotional and financial tolls of COVID.

Our new Art Therapist Heather started in January, taking over from Annette who moved interstate in late 2021.

Our art therapy program began in March 2020 at Doonside Technology High School. This funding was external to Little Possums and allowed us the opportunity to support high school students using art therapy with a trauma informed approach. We have found ways to work in the transition to high school space, supporting individual children as they transition into High School. By building the relationships between families and the High School/s, it has helped to lower the anxiety of both the family and child, allowing them to become familiar with the school environment before their child starts high school. The key outcomes have been reducing stress during this period of change and most importantly creating a form of safety and trust that will support these ongoing relationships.

Western Sydney Transition to School and Nepean Area Transition to School

We collectively worked alongside community and government Covid protocols to ensure children and family connection was built and maintained in our transition to school journey. Programs were held online with children, families and schools, with some schools allowing on site visits at the end of Term 4 so children could see each other face to face as well as the exciting place they will be going to in 2022!

A 4 week Transition to High School program in collaboration with Connect and Jesuit Social Services at Willmot Public School was implemented. This program focused on social/emotional needs of students, understanding and developing strategies for relationship building in the High School setting.



Connect Early



Despite the many challenges, Connect continued to promote a positive start for children and their families entering school. Across Nepean & Western Sydney Transition to school programs and our Kidzone / School holiday programs working alongside 4-12 year age children.

We are building awareness and advocate for all childrens' right to an optimal transition to school with CALD resources, an information rich TTS website, newsletters and the Aboriginal TTS Network meetings held 8 times per year. Amanda Kupke worked to share the message of the importance of reading to our children through the Paint the Blue REaD program — a huge thank you to all the partnering Blue Mountains organisations that support this great project.

Our collective impact work of 'All children start school well' with the Hive in Mt Druitt carries on with momentum. Outcomes of this leadership includes advocacy for access and equity to quality local early education and early intervention. The Early Childhood Educator Community of Practice is growing strongly, even with the workforce impacts of early education teams we work alongside.

Thank you to the truly wonderful support and work of the schools and organisations we work so strongly with, from Barnados, MOCS, Gateway Child & Family Services, Peppercorn, Salvation Army Lethbridge Park, Jesuit Social Services and Hope St to name a few.

A special thank you to Dept of Communities and Justice for their support in ensuring we were able to deliver individually to families and groups during a second year of COVID pandemic, their support in allowing for flexibility in delivery of services was truly appreciated by our team and families during very precarious times.

Sector Capacity Building

Connect delivered the Dept of Education funded Sector Capacity Building program for the third year in a row. The program supported 15 preschools in the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury area to increase educators' skills and capacity to include children with additional needs. The team supported preschools with face-to-face visits to mentor staff, delivered training and observed children to assist the preschool to apply for additional funding or make referrals to other services as required.

During this period several great initiatives were delivered including creating a weekly Key Word Sign practice, collating all resources onto an online resource for easy visual access for educators, creating a closed Facebook group and Community of Practice Network to enable educators and teachers to support each other — thus building their own capacity to share information and resources between centres and reduce reliance on outside supports.

The team also created a RoadMap to Reflection — a step by step process to assist teachers to think about the concerns they have for a child's development and support their own process of investigation and gathering appropriate support. This was extremely well received by the preschools and ensured that they were indeed increasing their own capacities to understand and support all children in their services.

Connect Child & Family Services submitted a competitive tender but was unfortunately not successful in the retender process for 2022-24. We would like to thank Kim Martin, Kate McCann, Genevieve Radford and Anita Andrews who delivered this service to these preschools over the three years of the program.



Connect Early

Across our community services in the Blue Mountains Region, a total 208 families 425 children were able to access support.

Heatherbrae is such a great place for parents and children. We love to go there. It's the bigger hands that hold our parents. Provide time and space for us to collect ourselves, to be heard and connected with other parents. Heatherbrae filled my emotional cup each time I visited, helped me to be a stronger, wiser and kinder parent."

– Heatherbrae family



Heatherbrae and playgroups

In 2021-22 Connect continued to provide inviting, friendly early learning spaces for families at seven sites from Penrith to Katoomba. Our Play and Chat groups met weekly at North Katoomba Public School, Katoomba Public School, Heatherbrae at Hazelbrook, Pinarroo OOSH Winmalee, Penrith South Public School and Kingswood South Public school.

Families told us that our groups enable both themselves and their children to make connections with others in their local community and receive support when they are facing difficulties. This has been particularly relevant for families who have newly moved to the region and find themselves without close family support. The gentle nature of the program and the support from local public schools ensures that the children and families engage in high quality early learning experiences, whilst building their confidence that is vital in their transition to early childhood centres and kindergarten. It was no mean feat that during this second year of the Covid pandemic that we were able to support a total of 78 families in our supported playgroups, achieved through committed and innovative team members.

Our Heatherbrae space in Lawson provides a much-needed source of welcoming support and connection for many families. During Covid restrictions we adapted by having a book-in system instead of drop-in system. This assisted us to manage attendance safely and provide an offering to the community. There were some challenges to using this approach, as it identified that one of the valued features of Heatherbrae is that families can be spontaneous, and they know we will be there for them — no planning required on their part!



Connect Early

'BestStart has been such a key part of helping me and my child move forward.'

- Best Start Parent



Working together with other community services enables us to refer and connect with a wider network of support for our families. We enjoyed working closely with Thrive, MOCS, Gateway Family Services, Blue Mountains Women's Health and Resource Centre which have enabled us to offer opportunities for parents to learn practical skills useful in their parenting role and beyond. This year we adapted by offering our "Circle of Security Parenting" online — this was attended by 8 parents. "Tuning into Kids" parenting course, mindfulness based art therapy for mothers of young children was offered and we again partnered with MOCS to facilitate the first time parents group happening in Heatherbrae. We referred our families to specialist support where needed, ranging in issues such as family violence, mental health and concerns about children's behavior or development. Its Connect's strong interagency network that helps us source multiple referral pathways for families. The weekly Early Childhood clinic was paused due to NSW Health prioritising the Covid response and we look forward to its return and have maintained our connection with Nepean Blue Mountains Health District.

Best start

Connect funded a small program to support families with concerns about their children's development to find relevant support within the local community. The Best Start model is based on immediate response and short-term support and connection. This program gathered momentum during 2021 growing a wide referral base as word of the program spread. We received and supported referrals for 68 children over the year. Referrals were most prevalent from local Paediatricians and Early Childhood Centres. Other referral pathways included GPs, Gateway Family Services and word of mouth from friends and family. This program covers the Penrith and Blue Mountains area with 71% of referrals from families in the Blue Mountains.

This approach resulted in 35 families receiving support to connect with services in our community including Paediatricians, therapists, GP, Aspect and Psychologists. There were 28 internal referrals for services from Connect to our Connected Abilities team for therapies and Key worker support. Due to staffing changes, the service delivery changed to a 2 day per week delivery during this year. The Best Start team remain responsive to families and continue to provide valuable support to families who need timely information and support and a vital way of connecting our families across the breadth of our own service offerings.



Connect Early



MY-TIME

The aim of My Time is to allow regular time for carers of children birth-18 years with a disability the opportunity to gather for support with other carers and a facilitated whilst their children are safely engaged with a dedicated play facilitator. The Connect @ My Time group was able to build up attendance despite lockdown disruptions, and we regularly had 4-5 families with sometimes up to 6 children attending. To minimise the impact to our group during this time — we offered zoom sessions and phone support. Families were tentative to return following the lockdown period, but we have re-established a consistent place in their week. Our Westend St venue became too small for our needs, so during the year we moved the group to run out of Bungarrabee Centre, Hazelbrook. The move to the bigger space was welcomed by most of the parents and even encouraged some ridesharing between attendees. The children really enjoyed the bigger space, and this also helped several of them become familiar with the room and settle more easily into our ELP program — making great connections!

We had an average of 4-5 attend the group each week but sent information/links and resources via email to a group of 23 families. We arranged a Sensory Screening with our local cinema “The Edge”, we participated in Laughter Yoga and Art Play and heard from various services including The Neuro Diversity Hub, The Holistic Centre for Neuro Diversity, Relationships Australia, Carer Gateway and Legal Aid following the Royal Commission. It was great to see friendships develop between the participants during the year and know they were connecting with each other outside of the My Time hours and keeping in touch. These connection build resilience and carer confidence and capacity.

Our Early Learning Program (ELP)

ELP provides a valuable step for families in pathway to accessing more formal Early Childhood Education experiences. Meeting weekly in small groups, this year the program supported 18 children from 16 families to gain confidence in their ability to play with their peers in a safe space and gradually learn to separate from their parent/carer. They learn routines that prepare them for early childhood settings and have the opportunity to learn new skills in play and communication that will support them when starting at preschool or long day care. We supported and transitioned 12 children to preschool during this time. Families are also supported to learn about their child’s development through their weekly contact with our Early Childhood teachers and through information sharing. This year to adapt to covid restrictions and reduced attendances we developed weekly info sheet (Connect Kids Corner) for families with small, easy-to-read play activities and created home activity packs and provided these through driveway drop off. Families were given the opportunity to connect via Zoom to complete the activities and participate in story time with our ELP teachers.

YAWN

Over YAWN’s ten years of operations, the program has operating through small grants and funding provided by Connect. In 2021/22 volunteers supported 12 families through YAWN — You Ask We Nurture. YAWN is a valued and recognised service in the Blue Mountains, supporting families with children under 12 months old with in home visits from local volunteers. We are referred families by Gateway Family Services, Thrive, Child and Family Health nurses, GP’s and Connect staff and the families who also self-refer. 12 new volunteers have been trained. The volunteer coordinator, Christy Hartlage facilitates sessions for volunteers for induction, support and training. These sessions are also important to foster social connection for our team of volunteers. We farewelled Christy as the co-founder and coordinator of YAWN, and grateful for her vision and tenacity.



Acknowledgements

In July 2021 Maree Ryan stepped down from her position as Director. We are grateful for the time and energy she committed to support the direction of the organisation and in particular the successful merger with Lapstone preschool and intervention service.

At the AGM in November 2021, a number of Directors retired from the Board including Erin Fearn-Smith, Peter Carroll and Robert Crowe. We are grateful to all of these Board Directors for their passion and commitment for children's and family services in the region and in particular acknowledge Robert's leadership as Chair and Director for 10 years.

Governance

A Board of Directors govern Connect and they are elected at each Annual General Meeting (AGM).

Directors are volunteers and come from the broader community representing people who use our services, academia, business and leadership and subject matter experts.

For 2021/2022 Connect's Board Directors were:

- Maree Ryan (stood down at July 2021)
- Robert Crowe Chair (stood down at AGM November 2021)
- Erin Fearn-Smith (stood down at AGM November 2021)
- Peter Carroll (stood down at AGM November 2021)
- Gabrielle Collins (Interim Treasurer) (joined at AGM November 2021)
- Klaus Engelhardt
- Anni Gethin
- Andi Salamon
- Barbara Cuthbert
- Alexandra Payne Treasurer (until AGM) and Interim Chair (from AGM to end of FY22)

We maintained our registration and reporting requirements with the Australian Non for Profits and Charities Commission (ACNC) as Connect Child and Family Services LTD (ABN 54 617 948 231).

Finance

As with many community organisations, we felt the impact of the pandemic, both on the social and emotional wellbeing of our community and staff members, and also in terms of our finances.

We took extra care to provide our teams protective equipment and RAT tests. We waived fees for families impacted by COVID and reduced our face to face disability services in response to families requests.

We continued to pay staff in the periods that meant service delivery was reduced and diverted their work to online support and other quality improvement initiatives.

We were grateful that the Government was able to support our commitment to families and our team. As a result we were able to return a balanced budget with a small surplus.



Connect with us

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