



connect
Children and Families

Annual Report FY23



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

Connect Children and Families 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.



Message from Chair

I would like to thank our CEO, Ann-Marie Elliott, and her executive team for their commitment, leadership, and service to our community. I would also like to thank the very hard working, caring staff and volunteers who make such a difference to the children, families and communities with whom we connect.

I have enjoyed working with my colleagues on the Connect Board and this year we have welcomed four new Board members who together bring a deep expertise in early education, finance, health and social services. I would like to thank Alexandra Payne and Anni Gethin for their significant contribution prior to stepping off the Board this year. Our Board Treasurer Gabrielle Collins' leadership of the financial strategy has enabled the executive team to focus on operationalising our strategy, as well as focusing on business as usual. Gabrielle has taken short term leave from the Board this year, due to work commitments, and we look forward to welcoming her back to the team.

The Board, with the Executive team and staff, has developed a clear 3-year strategy to guide our service to the community. I hope that some of the significant gaps in the accessibility of early education for children, from birth to school entry, are met as our services grow. I look forward to the coming year with a great sense of optimism, confident that the systems and capabilities that we are building will enable our staff to provide service excellence to children and families.

Rosemary Bishop
Board Chair, November 2023





Message from CEO

It's been a privilege to be Connect's CEO for the past year. We've faced numerous challenges, yet we've emerged with a clear vision to serve our community better. The post-COVID economic pressures have affected our families and impacted our operations. We've also grappled with the workforce crisis in early childhood and disability services. However, we've committed to supporting our Connected Abilities team to ensure its viability and continue our unwavering dedication to children with disabilities and developmental delays.

We've invested in our infrastructure to enhance practice development, efficiency and communication. Our unified team has engaged in meaningful conversations about our values at work, adapted to new work structures, implemented IT projects and improved integrated service delivery.

I commend the Bunya Early Childhood and Education Centre team, for their willingness to embrace significant changes during the merger with Connect. Change takes time. Drawing from our experience with Lapstone Preschool, which also joined Connect as rated 'Working Towards' National Standards and has achieved an 'Exceeding' status after three years, we anticipate celebrating Bunya's milestones on this journey.

The merger with Bunya Early Childhood and Education Centre resulted from many months of tireless work behind the scenes. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to our Senior Manager of Finance, Accounts, and Risk, the Senior Manager of Practice and Programs, our Practice Mentors, our Connect Early Education Manager, and our dedicated business support team.

My gratitude goes to our Board of Directors, whose steadfast commitment, expertise, and experience guide our organisation. They have made tough decisions to ensure our sustainability and ability to continue providing vital services that meet the needs of children and their families. Their leadership has set us on an exciting and ambitious path, recognising our potential as an employer of choice and a crucial community resource that must be safeguarded for future generations.

None of the remarkable accomplishments outlined in our annual report would be possible without the dedication and passion of our 123 staff members and volunteers, past and present. To every one of you, thank you for infusing your work with joy, care, and professionalism. Your contributions are what make our organisation genuinely exceptional.

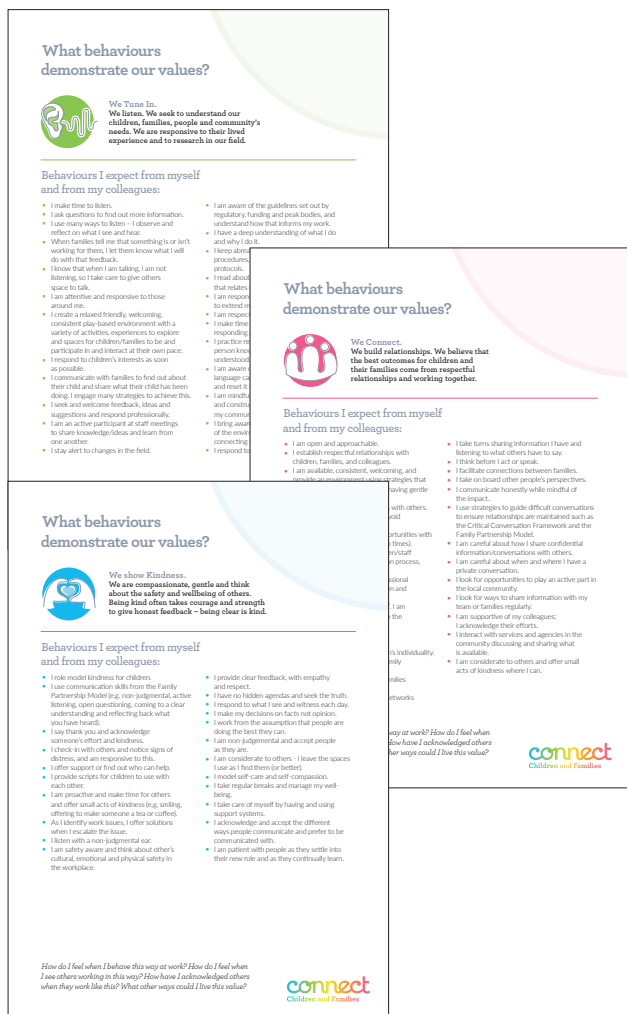
Ann-Marie Elliott
Chief Executive, November 2023



Diagram 1



Diagram 2



In September 2022, we changed our trading name to **Connect Children and Families** as feedback from our teams indicated that the term “services” suggests a transactional approach, which doesn’t align with Connect’s highly relational philosophy. Moreover, families facing vulnerabilities might have had negative experiences with ‘children’s services’ and could feel uneasy about this concept. We invited staff, children and families to vote on our new logo and have refreshed signage to raise our profile in the community (see Diagram 1).

Focus on our culture and our values

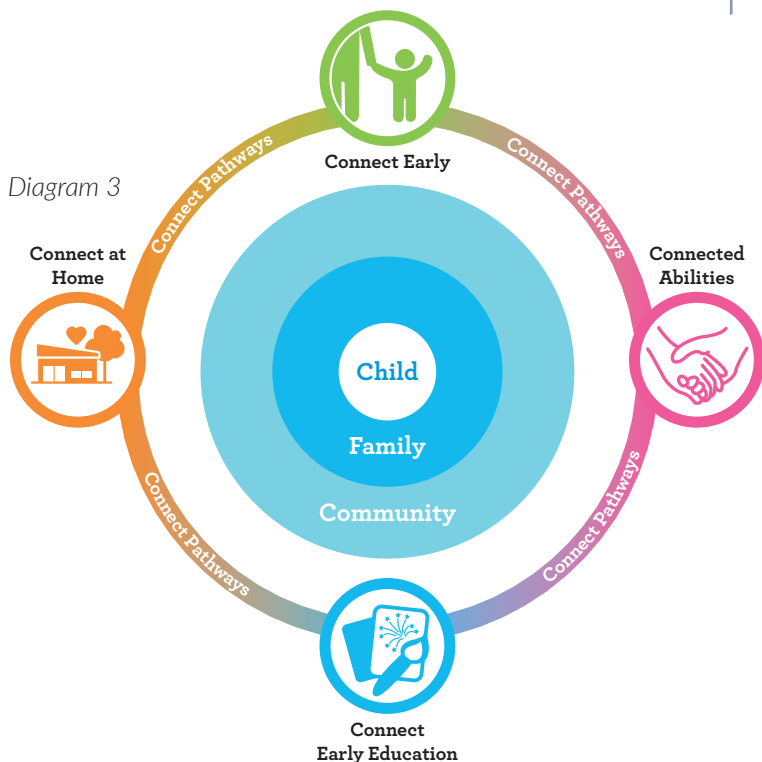
FY23 saw us extend our commitment to be a values-driven organisation. The whole team participated in the process of articulating what our values look like in practice – what behaviours we see and expect from ourselves and our teammates (see Diagram 2).

In our staff survey, we asked our people to reflect on the statement – “I can see the organisational values being used to guide all areas of our work.”

From April 2022 to April 2023, positive responses were increased across all values. Our perception of using our value **We All Walk Together**, went up by 23%, and **We Celebrate Every Child**, went up by 30%!

We have also committed to working in a more integrated way (see Diagram 3). Our work on our values and behaviours supports us to communicate and collaborate more effectively. We know working with this approach is more likely to result in better outcomes for children. This focus has had a positive result on our culture. Our staff survey results have shown an increase in staff who report:

“I have worked with other teams in Connect to support a child and family I work with.”



In April 2022,
47%
of respondents
said they agreed
or strongly
agreed with this
statement.

In April
2023 it was
61%

Furthermore,
63%
of respondents to our
staff survey in April
2022 said they agreed
or strongly agreed
with the following
statement.

“In the past 6
months, I have
collaborated with
people in other
organisations to
support children
and families.”

In April
2023 it was
72%



Karen Daniels and Kathy Coates have extensive experience in both the early childhood and community services sectors, as well as in coaching, mentoring and training.



Practice Mentors

Achieving consistent practice across a service footprint of 100km and a varied and diverse mix of service models is not easy. In FY23, we established the Practice Mentor roles (Early Childhood Practice Mentor, and the Family Partnership Practice Mentor) to support leaders with guiding practice approaches and implementing change management initiatives.

They have been instrumental in supporting teams to reflect on and articulate their practice philosophy. They have conducted unique situational analyses across all delivery programs in the organisation, gaining some clear insight into the strengths of each program and areas for development.

The team have delivered 28 individual mentoring sessions for staff and supported the development of quality improvement plans. In addition, they have delivered training across the organisation in areas such as:

- Introduction to Circle of Security Parenting
- Team Relationships
- Qi Skills
- Child Protection
- Philosophy development
- Transition to School Digital statements

Throughout FY23, the team have facilitated the Trainee Support hub, to encourage all of our trainees across Connect to network with each other for peer support, and to learn more about the diversity of Connect programs. They facilitated the Educational Leader network meetings, focusing on increasing the leadership capacity of educators in this role, and providing them with a supportive forum for reflection and growth.

“

“Having you for support has made the biggest difference, especially helping me grow in confidence in my role as Educational Leader” – Educator

“Mentoring support has given me the time and space to learn about and reflect on how I collaborate with families” – Educator

Diagram 4

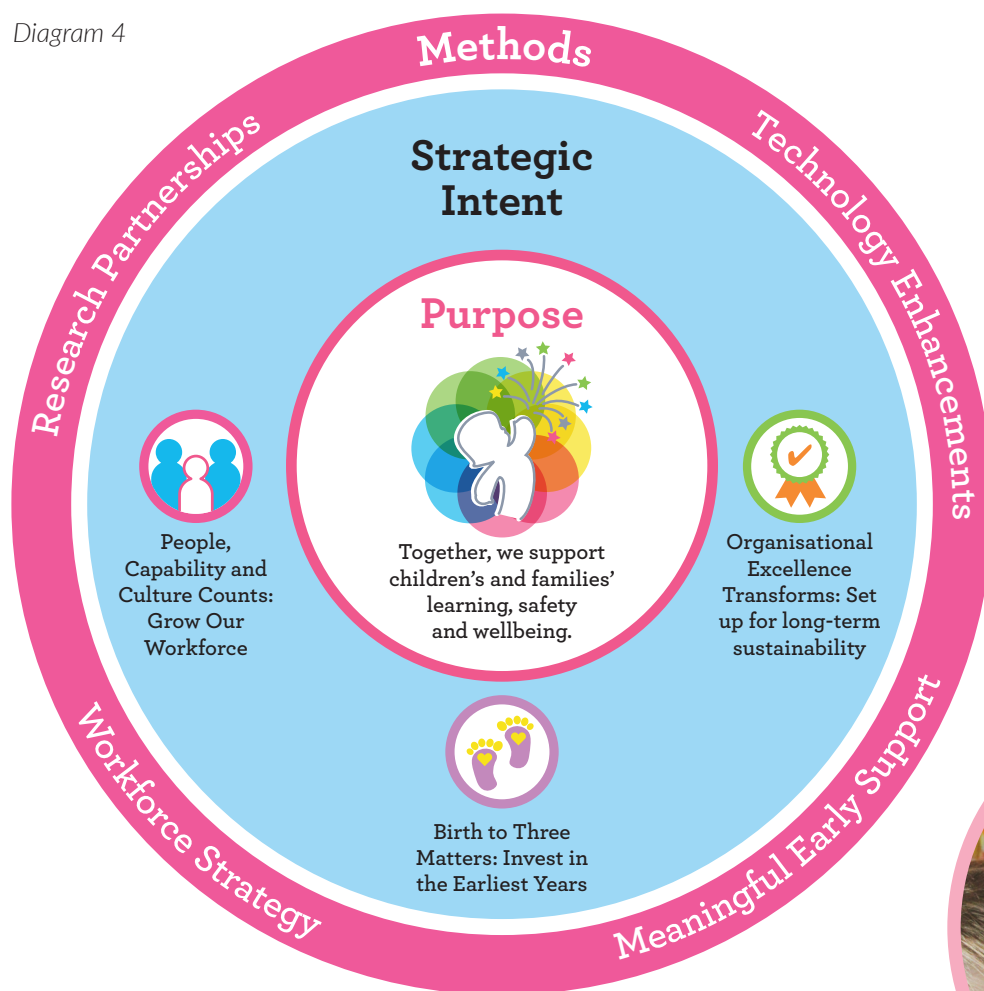


Diagram 5



Direction

In March 2023, our Board and Senior Team held an offsite workshop, crafting Connect's strategic direction for the next three years. We consulted teams, families, children and other organisations to check if we had captured the critical issues for our community and for our organisation. We had a strong endorsement of our plan (see Diagram 4).

Our Focus:

Birth to Three Matters: Those first three years are vital for children's lifelong health, well-being, and learning. Positive experiences now, build a strong foundation for their future.

People, Capability, and Culture: Our team is dedicated to doing their best for children and families. To make it happen, we'll retain and bring in talented professionals and ensure a great workplace.

Organisational Excellence Transforms: Equipping our team with tools and tech will improve communication, benefiting children and families. Partnering with other agencies will ensure our success lasts (see Diagram 5).



Business Services

Most of our team works directly with children and families in our centres, community spaces, other learning environments, and in their homes. A small crew keeps the organisation ticking across finance, business support, people, and culture. We are very grateful for their commitment, supporting our teams, collaborating with external agencies and being available to support families.

This year, we asked them to take on some significant projects. With the assistance of external collaborators, we have undertaken an IT strategy to assess how our current systems can be improved. We commenced the implementation of the recommendations of this strategy, including a cybersecurity assessment to ensure we are meeting all our data privacy responsibilities. We are pleased to say that this assessment reflected very positively on our systems. We commenced the implementation of a new employment software to enhance the experience of our employee journey. We also transitioned to a new IT provider to maximise efficiencies and available support in the ever-changing IT landscape. We have redeveloped our website and refined our social media presence. The team have also been instrumental in the successful transition of Bunya to Connect.



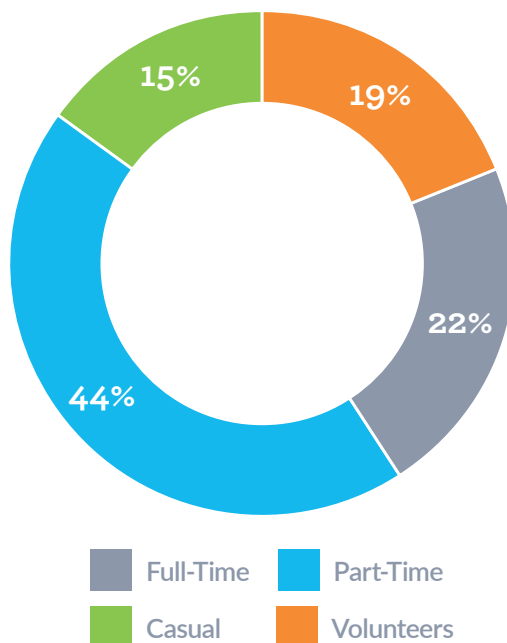
Melissa Gooch, Nicole Boothroyd, Allison Todd, Sarah Angelinetta, Allan Brown (not pictured).

Our People

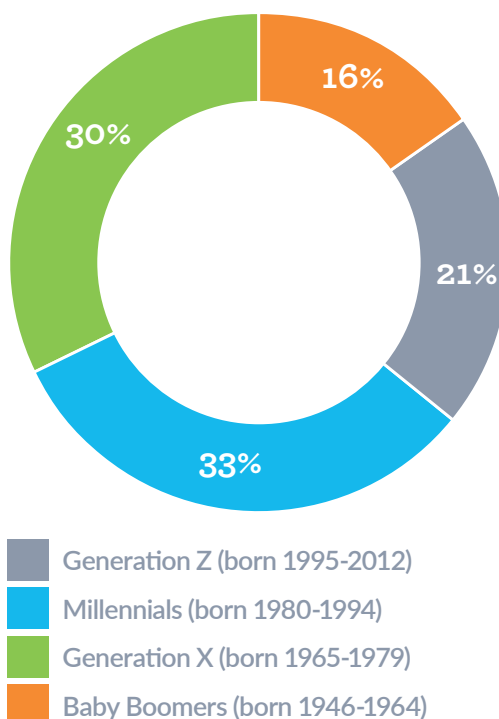
We increased our workforce in 2023:

- 123 Employees and 30 Volunteers
- 3 team members identify as Aboriginal.
- 80% of our people live in the Blue Mountains
- 63% of all staff work in the ECEC Centres

Percentage of employees

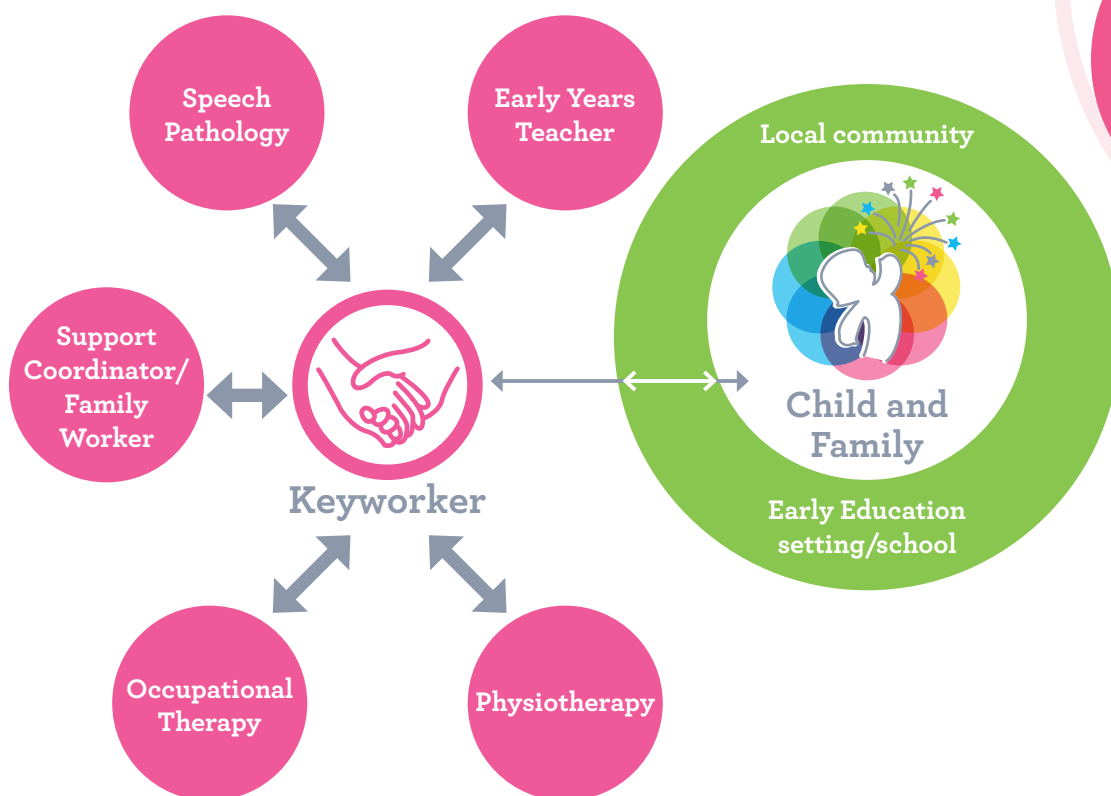


- There are four generations in our workplaces, representing:



- 31% have worked with us for 5 years or more
- Our turnover rate in FY23 was 27%, (which included 4 redundancies)

Diagram 6



Connected Abilities

In July 2022, our previous two NDIS teams became one, supporting children using the NDIS. With help from voting children and families, the team rebranded as the **Connected Abilities**. A group of dedicated members also joined a working party to establish an action plan for quality improvement. The team frequently met across the year to share training experiences, develop their team philosophy and articulate their Keyworker Model (see Diagram 6). Team member's attended the NDIS Conference, Autism and the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Trauma Informed Practice, Circle of Security, Cerebral Palsy Orthopedic Management, Work Health and Safety, and Good Grief – the impact and role of grief in the workplace.

The team demonstrated their commitment to improvement, whilst supporting 140 families throughout the year, focusing on what families want for their children and working alongside them, to achieve the best outcomes.

160 children received evidence-based, best-practice service delivery in their natural environments – at home, in early childhood education, playgroups, school or community spaces.

Our relationships with schools, early childhood settings, community organisations and networking with professionals, allow us to respond, collaborate and build capacity to achieve goals for the children. Our priority continues to be inclusion and participation for the child so that their voice is heard.

The year has seen children and families receive specialised equipment to meet their changing needs, enter mainstream Early Childhood settings with support, transition to primary school and high school with support plans, attend community settings for new experiences and engage in new social groups within the community.

“

My keyworker and speech pathologist have supported our family transitions and crisis points for 6 years, including withdrawal from school system to home schooling and social community participation after our sea change, we could not have navigated these changing needs without them”

– Mum of Liam, 11 years old

“

“The resources and strategies that the speechies provide allow us to address objectives in the classroom and improve engagement with child”

– Primary School teacher, Glenmore Park



New Offerings

Throughout the year, the speech pathologists, occupational therapist and physiotherapist responded to requests for speech, fine motor and gross motor assessments at our Connect Early Education services. This allowed parents to address concerns and receive home programs to develop skills.

Along with Developmental Screeners, we introduced Augmentative Alternative Communication devices to staff and families in Connect Early Education services so that they can be normalised within the program on a day-to-day basis. This upskills the educators and deepens children's inclusion and participation within the setting.

As the team continues to evaluate and respond based on parent survey results, the new year will see the introduction of Lego Play Therapy Groups and Sensory Profiles completed for children in early childhood services.

We know increasing our staff numbers is needed to respond to families on our waiting list; this remains a priority for FY24.



Connect Early

We supported 29 participants in the Little Possum program.

Connect Early Programs:

In FY23 our Connect Early Programs included:

- Heatherbrae
- Play and Chat Supported Playgroups around the Blue Mountains, Nepean and Western Sydney LGA
- Dad's Playgroup
- The Early Learning Program
- Nepean Blue Mountains Transition to School
- Western Sydney Transition to School
- Connect and Nurture
- Little Possums

Total number of children who were engaged in Connect Early programs in 22-23:

1489

- This includes 321 children in Nepean Blue Mountains TTS,
- 535 children participating at Heatherbrae,
- 30 children participating in the Early Learning Program,
- 28 children participating at Dad's Playgroup,
- 97 children participating in Play and Chat Supported Playgroups,
- 386 children participating in programs in Western Sydney, and
- 92 children taking part in Connect and Nurture.

Total number of families who were engaged in Connect Early programs in 22-23:

1069

- This includes 264 families in Nepean Blue Mountains TTS,
- 391 families participating at Heatherbrae,
- 24 families participating in the Early Learning Program,
- 26 families participating at Dad's Playgroup,
- 72 families participating in Play and Chat Supported Playgroups,
- 236 families participating in programs in Western Sydney, and
- 56 families taking part in Connect and Nurture.
- We supported 29 participants in the Little Possum program.

The geographic footprint of these programs is significant, stretching from Portland to Lidcombe to North Richmond. As we reflected on place-based service integration and evidence-based development of programs, we saw changes in how our teams utilised locations and resources. Being responsive to these unique communities takes deep consideration and skill, and the successful engagement of these activities is a testament to our teams and leaders who facilitate these programs.

Our teams participate in vital community networks and partner with other organisations and agencies, including MOCS, Gateway, Thrive, Barnardos, Belong, The Smith Family, The Hive, and NCNS. This allows for collective and collaborative work across the regions we work in. Our teams have also attended training on evidence-based approaches, including the QI curriculum, the Introduction to Circle of Security Parenting, the HOPE framework and Funds of Knowledge.

Our Connect Early programs are supported by funding from NSW Dept of Education, NSW Dept of Communities and Justice, Department of Social Services and WentWest Primary Health Network. The trust and support from these agencies is greatly appreciated and has allowed for responsive and innovative provisions that connect communities and support children and families to thrive.

What are our families saying after participating in Connect Early Programs:

- 96% of families surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that their child feels confident in settings outside the home and that they and their child have made new friends.
- 100% of families surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt connected to others in their community.
- 92% of families surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that they have a good understanding of their child's development and were confident in their parenting skills.
- 100% of families surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt the facilitator(s) listened and understood their needs.



The Connect and Nurture Program — a new chapter for Connect family support

Accessing federal funding for our Connect and Nurture (CAN) Program was a considerable achievement for Connect. Funding from the Department of Social Services' Stronger and Resilient Community program enabled us to extend the foundations of the You Ask We Nurture (YAWN) program. YAWN was established 10 years ago, in response to the needs of local families to have support from volunteers in their homes during the first year of their babies' lives.

YAWN was majority self-funded by Connect and supplemented by small one-off grants over the years. Despite these funding challenges, the program was highly successful and in demand due to its roots of listening to community needs.

CAN has used the original architecture of YAWN, and listened to the community and families to facilitate vital additions to this service, which now includes the roles of a social worker and volunteer coordinator and has expanded its eligibility to families with children under three years of age.

Feedback has shown that this model is also a sought-after support for families, including the program's Family Worker, Shanna Kearns, being nominated by a participating family for a Westfield Local Hero's Award.

Much like its predecessor YAWN, the heart of the CAN program is the generous and dedicated volunteers who support our participating families. Many relationships between CAN volunteers and families extend far beyond their time together in the CAN program, with lifelong friendships and connections being established.

“

“It changed my life. I wish all new mums had such support”

– CAN Participant

“The small numbers enable my children to feel safe and confident to explore their environment. The educators have been fantastic. Made us feel immediately welcome and cared for. And I've noticed they treat all families the same and meet them where they are at”

– Early Learning Program participant

Farewell to Little Possums

Over the past seven years, Connect has led the Little Possums program in Western Sydney.

This innovative program consisted of a play therapist and a family mentor who worked with local primary schools to deliver place-based support for children and families who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

At the time of implementation, Connect had a strong presence in early intervention programs like Brighter Futures, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) were limited. We appreciated the trust that was given to Connect to implement the program by local schools, communities and funder Went West Primary Health Network.

After much reflection on the current issues affecting the communities Little Possums was operating in, the hard decision was made to transfer the program. The transfer to Ngroo Education means the Little Possums program will move to an organisation with a deep understanding of cultural sensitivities, knowledge, and holistic community-wide assistance that will genuinely meet the needs of our families and team members.

Having already partnered with Ngroo Education, we were confident in their extensive expertise and ability to implement the warm handovers and referral pathways that families participating in the program require. We are delighted to report a successful transfer has occurred and feel certain that the delivery of this program under Ngroo will have many positive impacts for communities, families and children.

We extend our heartfelt thanks for the trust, support, and expertise that all our community partners have contributed to the development of Little Possums. We are immensely proud of our collective achievements.

We'd like to acknowledge program manager Jo Everingham, and Little Possums team members Annette Bex, Karen Fernando and Heather Easton, for their commitment to the program over the last seven years.

“

“Wonderful way for parents and carers to connect in a supportive community where we can all help each other as we strive to be the best parents and grandparents we can be.”

– Heatherbrae participant



Connect Early Education

Connect continued to see strong demand for its Early Education and Care Programs. Utilisation rates are consistently above 95% across these programs. As an organisation, we have been reflecting on ways to increase access to and maintain the affordability of these programs. We are no longer charging for public holidays. Another key strategy has been piloting 'session types' in our longer day programs to support families to maximise their Child Care Subsidy and reduce their out-of-pocket expenses. Over the course of FY 24 Connect will seek feedback from families to measure the impact of these strategies.

Transition to School Statements have been an area of focused review and improvement. We look at this document as a rich opportunity to celebrate the children who have been part of our programs and communicate their individuality to support optimal transitions to their next educational setting.

Community connections were enhanced with Uncle Lex Dadd continuing to visit these programs. We saw our teams taking their children out and about on walking excursions and using the Connect minibus. Children knowing and belonging to their local communities builds self-identity and connectedness. The above-and-beyond dedication of the team members who lead and facilitate these experiences is very appreciated.

Ensuring our relationships with families are prioritised post Covid, has been a focus. Many events were held to facilitate families meeting one another, having the opportunity to get to know educators in a relaxed way and also explore the learning environment their children participate in. The innovation of these events has been inspiring, everything from chats with coffee vans and pots of soup to drumming circles. The strength of these partnerships is evident in the interactions and feedback received by these programs.

Growing our Connect Early Education programs- Welcoming Bunya Early Childhood Centre

In February 2023, a significant milestone was reached as Connect proudly welcomed Bunya Early Childhood Centre, establishing our fifth Early Education Centre in the picturesque Blue Mountains. Nestled within the heart of the Winmalee community, Bunya Early Childhood Centre has stood as a well-loved and vital service, maintaining its roots in the original purpose-built premises provided by the Blue Mountains City Council. Bunya ECC provides daily education and care for 54 children aged six weeks to six years.

Total number of babies and children who were engaged in Connect Early Education Centres in 22-23:

343,
80 under 3 years
of age and 263
children aged 3-5
years

Total number of families who were engaged in Connect Early Education Centres in 22-23:
310



The integration of Bunya ECC under the governance of Connect signifies a continuation of the critical services provided to the Winmalee community. We strive to ensure that our local communities maintain access to high-quality, affordable, and family-focused early childhood education—a necessary resource for the growth and development of our youngest community members.

Facilitating this transition has been the dedicated support of many key personnel at both Bunya ECC and Connect.

A special acknowledgement to Connect's Early Education Manager, Danielle Grosse, along with the invaluable expertise of our Practice Mentor team, comprised of Karen Daniels and Kathy Coates. Together, they have worked in tandem with the Bunya team to implement the policies and practices that define Connect's Early Education programs.

A notable enhancement already at Bunya ECC's has been integrating digital software systems such as Storypark, XAP, and Folio. These systems have been instrumental in elevating the documentation standard, record-keeping, and overall compliance. Recognising the importance of the physical environment in engaging the learning of children, a strategic investment has been made to enhance the resources and facilities at Bunya ECC.

We believe that our teams are our best asset, so the ongoing professional development of the dedicated Bunya team has been implemented, ensuring that they remain at the forefront of best practices in early childhood education.

We eagerly anticipate Bunya ECC's growth under the Connect umbrella. With the amalgamation of expertise, resources, and a shared commitment to excellence, Bunya will continue to thrive as a beacon of community-focused Early Education and Care within the Blue Mountains community.

Recognition under the National Quality Framework

It was a big year for testing our policies and practices under the assessment processes for the National Quality Framework with both Connect's Possum's Patch, Mount Victoria and Lapstone Preschool teams undergoing the ratings and assessment processes with NSW Department of Education.

The National Quality Framework consists of National Regulations for Education and Care Services, the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards. The ratings and assessment process is an intense but necessary process, where assessment officers attend and observe the program over 1-2 days. Programs must provide in-depth evidence of their key embedded practice under the seven quality standards and show their compliance with the national regulations.

In July, 2022 Possum's Patch, Mount Victoria, underwent this process. This team has invested time since their previous rating in 2020, reflecting on areas for improvement and innovation. This has included utilising their unique physical environment as the third teacher and developing their pedagogy and collaborative relationships. This commitment paid dividends, as they were rated "Meeting" overall with the standards of the Educational Program, Respectful and Equitable Relationship with Children and Professionalism rated as "Exceeding" the National Quality Standards.

This rating is a significant achievement and acknowledgement for the whole team, especially the leadership team at the time, Director Simone Chaffey and Educational Leader Karen Daniels.



Lapstone Preschool was next to undertake this process in September 2022. This milestone was especially significant for our Lapstone team who became part of Connect in 2019. Their program was rated as “Working Towards” the National Quality Standards at that time. Since then, we’ve given great consideration, resources, and energy to improving the practices and program at Lapstone.

This has led to incredible changes in how the physical environment is utilised, how inclusion of all children is viewed and achieved and how educators respond to, respect and interact with children. It was wonderful for the team to share and highlight all their progress and hard work over this three-year period and be rated as “Exceeding” overall against the National Quality Standard! An outstanding result for the team, children, families and Connect!

Director, Rhonda Kasalo and Educational Leader, Joanne Roe, who led this process, are to be congratulated on their commitment to leading their team to ensure the best outcomes for all children.

These results are exceptional, with the latest National Quality Standards Snapshot reporting that currently only 24% of services are rated as Exceeding overall and 23% are rated as Exceeding in area of Educational Program, 25% in the area of Relationships with Children and 21% in the area of Professionalism.

This compelling evidence attests to the fact that Connect’s allocation of resources to governance and program support is indeed a valuable and worthwhile investment.

Connect’s Practitioner Research takes the stage at the Early Childhood Australia National Conference

The ConnectED Practitioner Research Project took place from June 2021 until May 2022. This project was undertaken with Associate Professor Christine Woodrow (Western Sydney University) and Associate Professor Linda Newman (University of Newcastle) and involved teams from Connect Early Education programs.

Implementing this project has had key impacts for our organisation, including utilising a practitioner research model to embed critical reflection and Educational Leadership.

With a commitment to share our professional understanding, an abstract was submitted for the Early Childhood Australia National Conference in October 2022. Our abstract was successful and a full presentation on the findings was co-authored by Associate Professor Christine Woodrow and Associate Professor Linda Newman, Angela Gillespie and Ann-Marie Elliott. The presentation, “*A Modern Fusion: Practitioner Research and Educational Leadership*”, was presented by Connect Senior Manager, Angela Gillespie and Associate Professor Christine Woodrow to a full and engaged room.

Key messages of this presentation included:

- The current ambiguity of the Educational Leader role within the Early Education sector and how this often resulted in inaction.
- The alignment between the elements of critical reflection and practitioner research practices.
- How Educational Leaders can support their teams to review existing data with a new research lens.
- The dispositions that supported Educational Leaders to be successful in their roles; ability to cope with ambiguity, ability to be vulnerable and a learner; rather than seeking security in being a knower, seeing opportunities for dovetailing of responsibilities, and valuing their team’s professional growth over their personal professional growth.
- How organisations can support and embed a practitioner research model of Educational Leadership.

The impact of this work has continued to influence the ways Educational Leader is supported in Connect Early Education programs. The roles of Educational Leaders have been reviewed and a framework of resources and support has been developed to guide their work. This ensures our Early Education teams are supported to implement sound programming and planning approaches and strategies and engage in rich critical reflection on their practices. The outcome of this is, intentional and engaging programs that lead to children developing as confident, curious and lifelong learners.



Connect At Home

In 2022, we developed a joint project with our neighbour organisation, Mountain Outreach Community Services (MOCS) to develop an initiative to ameliorate the effects of Covid-19 on young children's literacy learning. With a grant from Multicultural NSW, we created packs of contemporary picture books to help families better support their children's literacy, social and emotional development.

These book-sharing packs focused on resilience, including Aboriginal stories and the specially developed Shared Reading Guide that accompanied them. We created this in consultation with our Early Childhood educators, the Connected Abilities team, MOCS community development workers, and Uncle Lex. We worked with a local independent book seller — RoseyRavelston Books — to purchase the books.

The Connect at Home pack consisted of the following in a canvas tote bag: four picture books, 'Shared Reading Guide', immunisation brochures, Blue Mountains Library 'Story Time' brochure, local playgroups map with contact details, tips for sharing books flyer, Paint the Blue REaD bookmark, and Connect stickers.

A total of 200 packs were distributed through Connect's own network of early childhood services, including Early Childhood Care and Education centres, preschools, playgroups, transition to school programs, disability services and our home visiting service. We also engaged with our partner, MOCS, to distribute the packs through their network of supported playgroups, Aboriginal parenting groups, and their work with socially and geographically isolated parents of young children. We utilised Assetbots, a database for tracking resources with custom QR codes, to keep a record of where and when packs were being distributed, and so that we could re-pack them once returned and then re-distribute them to other families. This continual borrowing cycle will continue until all service

delivery sites have participated in the delivery of packs. At the time of this report, **884 families across the Blue Mountains have borrowed a book pack.**

All families who participated in the program were invited to complete a survey. Of the respondents, 40% had children aged under 1 year old, 40% had children aged between 2 and 3 years, and 40% had children aged between 4 and 5 years old. All respondents reported their children engaged with every book, with Open Your Heart to Country being read multiple times across all age groups. 60% of respondents indicated that they believed that the books had an impact of their child's developing resilience and confidence, with the remaining 40% of families being unsure about the impact of the books on their child's resilience at this stage. Comments from families in the open feedback section of the survey centred around the variation of books, and the introduction to children of the concept of borrowing from libraries, something which they could not introduce their young children to during the pandemic. In the family survey, 25% of respondents indicated that they found the vaccination information in the pack helpful.

We officially launched the packs with our community on October 19th, 2022. Uncle Lex Dadd, a local Aboriginal elder and teacher, welcomed 35 guests to Dharug and Gundungurra country with a song and an oral story, recognising the rich cultural tradition of oral storytelling in Aboriginal families and communities. Jayden Barnes, a Western Sydney University lecturer, presented the benefits of picture books and storytelling for building young children's resilience.



Our Board

For FY23 Connect's Board Directors were Alexandra Payne, Rosemary Bishop, Gabrielle Collins, Barbara Cuthbert, Andi Salamon, Anni Gethin, Mike Lee and Kush Bhatia.

Alexandra Payne stepped down from her position on the Board at the November 2022 AGM after nearly seven years of voluntary work. We acknowledge Ali's significant contribution to the governance of Connect, including as Treasurer and Acting Chair, and are very grateful to Ali's commitment to the organisation, particularly over the turbulent Covid era, her stewardship of the Board as Acting Chair and her commitment to recruiting key leadership roles within the organisation. Anni Gethin stepped off the Board in January 2023, and we are grateful for her contributions to supporting the organisation's direction and always bringing an evidence-based perspective to discussions. Gabrielle Collins stepped down as Director/Treasurer at the end of FY23. We thank her for her commitment to the organisation, and we are grateful for the time and energy she committed to support the direction of the organisation and in particular, the successful merger with Bunya and her contribution to the development of the Strategic Plan and Strategic Investment.

Governance

A Board of Directors govern Connect and they are elected per Connect's Constitution. The Chair is allocated a stipend and all other Directors are volunteers and come from the broader community representing academia, business and leadership and subject matter experts.

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 23FY

22/23FY is the first financial year following three years of disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The organisation has refocused on its charitable purpose, future directions and service provision.

The Board of Directors invested in two major projects to grow the organisation's service footprint, respond to challenges, and focus on priorities.

These two major projects included (1) merger with a local not-for-profit long day care provider, Bunya Child Care Centre Inc. "Bunya" (effective 1st February 2023) and (2) planning and implementation for the organisation's three-year Strategic Plan (24FY-26FY).

The Bunya merger resulted in an acquisition surplus in the 23FY results. However, both projects involved a significant commitment of staff resources and expenditure, contributing to an anticipated net deficit for the 23FY.

Other factors contributing to a net deficit for the 23FY, include:

- Internal improvement projects — including I.T. Strategy (external consultant), review and implementation of new software platforms (Childcare management system, HR and Payroll, NDIS), outsourcing service arrangements (I.T. support and site maintenance — leading to staff redundancy payments), project budgeting and costings.
- NDIS operations resulted in an overall deficit. NDIS pricing relies on Federal Government approved Pricing Arrangements and the limits of which did not increase in the 23FY (nor 22FY) in line with economic pressures. The organisation has committed to underwriting the costs of operating our NDIS provision that are not met by the price guide.
- Staff recruitment is an ongoing challenge, especially prevalent in the Early Childhood Sector and reflected in increased recruitment costs.
- Increased employment remuneration (Awards) and related on-costs such as Super and Worker's Compensation in accordance with Fair Work.



The sector faces a triple threat of economic challenges, including downward pressure on revenue, increased pressure on expenditure and the increased needs of the community. However, despite these economic challenges, Connect continues to support families with high-quality, affordable services, has adequate reserves, and is well placed to invest in the organisation's three-year strategy in the 24FY and corresponding investment budget.

Collaborators

Connect is grateful for the ongoing and continued support of our funding bodies, families and community stakeholders. A big thank you to all our wonderful collaborators.

- Belong Blue Mountains
- Mountain Outreach Community Services (MOCS)
- Local Public and Independent Schools
- Blue Mountains City Council
- Hey Mel! Communications
- Cocoon Creative
- Synergy
- Tech Ability
- MCR IT
- Kate McKinnon Design
- RoseyRavelston Books
- Gateway Family Services

Our funders

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 NSW Department of Education
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 Went West Primary Health Network
 Federal Department of Social Services

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