

## THE SOUTH COAST CHILD WELLBEING NETWORK REPORT 2025

### **Overview**

The South Coast Child Wellbeing Network (SCCWN) was formed in 2012 under the ethos that **Protecting Children is Everyone's Business**. It brings together multiple local services to promote a shared responsibility for the wellbeing and safety of children, young people, and families.

In celebration of National Child Protection Week (7-13 September 2025), SCCWN facilitated two major initiatives: the Family Fun Day series across multiple locations and the annual Conference held in Kiama. These events aimed to increase awareness of child protection issues, foster community engagement, and equip professionals with tools and strategies to support at-risk children and families.

The fundamental rights of children as identified by the UN General Assembly (1989) include safety, freedom from violence, and a stable family environment. Child protection is preventing and responding to risks which may revoke these rights.

Child abuse and neglect is one of Australia's most significant social problems. In 2023 – 24 around 1 in 31 children aged under 18 encountered the child protection system. This is a decrease from the 2020 – 21 numbers however the number of children with a substantiation of abuse has increased. [Child protection Australia 2023–24, Child protection system in Australia - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)

### **Conference**

**Date: 16th September 2025**

**Location: Kiama Pavilion**

**Theme: Connection through Play to Enhance Social and Emotional Wellbeing**

Over 150 professionals from government and non-government organizations attended the conference to connect with colleagues, share resources, and explore potential collaborative initiatives.

The conference commenced with a Welcome to Country by Dr (Aunty) Joyce Donovan who for over 55 years, has worked to advance healthcare, education and social justice for First Nations children and families across the Illawarra.

Deputy Mayor Melissa Matters from Kiama Municipal Council spoke of the Council's long engagement and support of Network.

Maria Corsiglia brought her experience and in depth understanding of the sector to MC the Day.

Throughout the day Woodslane Health Book sellers provided a range of books and professional resources for attendees to purchase to further support their understanding of the conference themes.

**Presenters:**

**Lisa Kervin:** Delivered a presentation on “*Building Playful and Connected Communities*”. Play is a powerful catalyst for connection, creativity and collective wellbeing, exploring how playful experiences – across ages and settings – can strengthen relationships, foster resilience and nurture inclusive communities. Drawing on research and lived experience, it invites a reimagining of play as a shared practice that brings people together.

Lisa also ran a workshop titled “Under, over, through: Moving with Digital Technologies” which explored ways to move with digital technologies exploring different augmented reality scenarios using our bodies to dance, sing and explore through digital games.

**Tim Wemys:** Keynote speaker’s “Play is a Game Changer – Engaging Fathers in Positive Play” detailed the Fathering Project, an initiative that aims to meet fathers and father figures where they are at and work together to give them the skills and insights to be the best they can be for their kids.

**Quill Darby:** Junkyard Rascals’ workshop engaged everyone’s inner child to explore play with curiosity in a child led way.

**Lee Moran and Brent Pritchard:** Introduced The Deadly Dharawals a culturally responsive mentoring program from Koonawarra Public School that supports the social and emotional development of all students through play, story and identity.

**Emma Rattenbury:** Explored the role of play in secure attachment, brain development and meaningful connection.

**Event Format:**

All participants attended both of the two available Keynote presentations and then chose two of the four workshops which were repeated in the afternoon. Attendance was not evenly split between the workshops.

**Evaluation Outcomes:**

119 participants provided quantitative and qualitative insights about the learning and value of the conference.

**Attendees:**

The conference achieved strong cross-sector reach, with participants predominantly drawn from Early Childhood (44 respondents) and Family Support/Community Services sectors, alongside representation from health, education, NGOs, trauma-informed services, and local government. Early Childhood Educators made up the single largest professional group (40), followed by Family Support Workers (17), Case Workers (7), Managers (7), Teachers (6), Social Workers (5), and Counsellors (5).

Cross-sector involvement supports integrated service delivery, shared language, and collaboration for child wellbeing.

## **Presenters:**

### ***Lisa Kervin***

- Engagement: 91.6% agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree)
- Relevance: 94.1% agreement

This keynote was the highest-rated session of the conference, demonstrating exceptional alignment between content, audience needs, and delivery.

High engagement and relevance scores, combined with the feedback on the digital technologies and play workshop, indicate that Lisa effectively translated research into actionable practice. learning events.

### ***Tim Wemyss***

- Engagement: 64.7% agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree)
- Relevance: 64.7% agreement

While still valued, this keynote appears to have been less universally accessible. Possible contributing factors include length, delivery style, or perceived applicability across diverse professional roles.

## **Workshops:**

### ***Lisa Kervin***

- Engagement: 90% agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree)
- Relevance: 80% agreement

### ***Lee Moran and Brent Pritchard***

- Engagement: 98.6% agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree)
- Relevance: 95.8% agreement

### ***Emma Rattenbury***

- Engagement: 88.8% agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree)
- Relevance: 95.8% agreement

### ***Quill Darby***

- Engagement: 95.4% agreement (Strongly Agree + Agree)
- Relevance: 92.4% agreement

Across all workshops, no session received a single “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” response, indicating uniformly high quality. Workshops led by Lee Moran and Brent Pritchard and Quill Darby showed particularly strong engagement and relevance ratings.

Feedback explicitly noted a desire to attend all workshops highlighting a strong demand for applied, skills-based learning.

## **Conference Outcomes:**

### ***Knowledge and skill transfer:***

- Play-based practice
  - Strong intention to use loose play, junkyard play, and open-ended play approaches.

- Increased focus on being present, allowing children to explore, and reducing unnecessary time pressures.
- Greater awareness of when to be hands-on and when to step back and observe.
- Cultural knowledge and inclusion
  - Ongoing use of Dharawal activities and learning.
  - Increased awareness of Country, culture, and history.
  - Applying culturally informed language and practices in daily work.
- Supporting families and caregivers
  - Encouraging parents and carers to actively play with their children.
  - Creating more opportunities for families to play together.
  - Supporting and engaging fathers and male caregivers.
  - Communicating the importance of play in everyday routines.
- Professional practice and reflection
  - Applying learning across multiple areas (“all that has been learnt”).
  - Using reflective tools and strategies.
  - Supporting colleagues to be helpful and responsive.
- Child development and wellbeing
  - Greater understanding of the role of play in brain development.
  - Supporting children to take safe risks and learn from mistakes.
  - Paying closer attention to children’s play cues and behaviours.
- Digital and contemporary practice
  - Using digital technologies in positive and balanced ways.
  - Integrating technology into play and learning appropriately.

*Suggestions to further enhance the conference:*

- Increase participation and choice
  - Provide opportunities for participants to attend more workshops or access key sessions they may miss.
  - Consider repeating popular workshops or offering parallel session recordings.
- Strengthen interactive and practical learning
  - Increase hands-on activities, practical sessions, and applied learning opportunities.
  - Continue and expand workshops that support clinical and everyday practice.
- Expand networking and collaboration
  - Provide more structured small-group discussions and group activities.
  - Use seating arrangements and facilitated networking to encourage new connections.
  - Include more opportunities for service presentations and information sharing.
- Deepen learning and professional development
  - Explore key sector issues, research topics, and group supervision models.
  - Increase focus on community services and social work perspectives.
  - Include content relevant to primary school-aged children (K–6).
- Support implementation in practice
  - Strengthen links between play theory and available community services.
  - Provide practical tools and ideas for embedding learning into everyday work.
- Minor logistical improvements
  - Ensure access to filtered water.
  - Continue refining session flow and time allocation.

Overall, most respondents had no additional suggestions, indicating high satisfaction. Feedback suggests future conferences could be enhanced through more interactive learning, deeper networking opportunities, and expanded access to workshops and practical resources.

## **Family Fun Day**

**Date: 4th September 2025**

SCCWN members, local agencies offering child and family services and key supports within the community e.g Libraries, Police Community Liaison Officers, and First Nations Elders, engage parents and families at three concurrent events across the Illawarra and Shoalhaven.

The events are held within the malls at Dapto, Warrawong and Nowra. SCCWN identified these areas through analysis of AEDC and SEIFA data. Whilst there are many other communities in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven identified as “at risk” communities these three sites attract families from a wide geographical area. These sites also have integrated play areas for children and encourage families to spend time in the mall rather than rushing in and out as experienced in other centres. This improves the willingness of families to engage with the activities offered.

### **The events:**

- Model low cost, easily replicated, interactive activities for children.
- Engage parents / carers with local providers and supports through incidental conversation, provision of information and referral, in a non-clinical setting, fostering trust and reducing barriers to service access.
- Engage children and families with Early Literacy and Transition to School support through the Paint the Town REaD and Big Fat Smile program participation.
- Increase community awareness of child protection and wellbeing services.
- Strengthened trust and access to services through community-focused approach.

The Local Mayors and Lord Mayors actively participate in events providing the opening address and reading a story to the participating children and families.

First Nations Elders welcome participants through storytelling and song.

Bright Spark and Agy the red-tailed black cockatoo greet the children during their guest appearances at the events.

All children are provided with a passport which is stamped at each activity they engage with encouraging longer engagement in a range of activities improving opportunity for parents / carers to have conversations with the services present.

Children take home the item they have made but are also provided with a bag with a fridge magnet of local support services, an age-appropriate book and information on early literacy.

Families who wish to complete the survey are put into the draw for prizes at the end of the day at each event.

The activities run from 0930 to 1130 at Warrawong and Dapto but have been moved to 1000 to 1200 at Nowra to meet the needs of the local community. A reading tent is at each venue to provide a quiet, low stimulus space for children and families to sit and either listen to a book or take a break.

High community turnout demonstrated the effectiveness of the events as a soft entry to service engagement with families appreciating the welcoming atmosphere and variety of activities offered.

All agencies participating recognise the importance of ongoing collaboration to sustain the impact of such events.

### ***Evaluation Outcomes:***

It is difficult to assess the number of families attending due to the open space they are held in, and some may only stay for a short period of time and speak to only one service provider but over 150 bags were given out over the three sites.

### ***Warrawong***

Participants attended from a range of surrounding local areas extending as far north as Bulli.

32 families completed the survey. Children's ages ranged from 3 months to 6 years, with the majority aged 1–4, indicating strong reach to families in early childhood. Geographic catchment concentrated within postcodes 2500–2529, demonstrating effective local access. Families identified across a wide range of cultural backgrounds including Aboriginal, Australian, Māori, Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, New Zealand, Macedonian/Croatian, Hindu and others.

The Warrawong event demonstrates strong inclusivity, reaching culturally and linguistically diverse families as well as Aboriginal families. This aligns well with Child Protection Week objectives, where early engagement, visibility, and trust-building are critical.

Families primarily heard about the event through: Facebook (12), Walk-past exposure (9). Secondary sources included friends, Park and Play, HIPPIY Program, parents, and Instagram. This pattern shows a dual strength promotion is essential through digital promotion and physical visibility. Nearly one-third of participants attending simply by passing by the event which reinforces the value of place-based, community-embedded delivery.

94% of families identified learning easy, fun activities with children which is an exceptionally strong outcome. Nearly all respondents reported gaining practical play ideas they could use at home. This suggests that activities were developmentally appropriate, messaging was clear and non-technical and families felt empowered rather than instructed. This result strongly supports the preventative and capacity-building intent of the event model.

Increased awareness of services had a 90% positive return which suggests service information may be absorbed unevenly.

### **Dapto**

46 families completed the survey. Like Warrawong participants at the Dapto event were from a range of post codes representing the surrounding suburbs. The postcode 2530 – Dapto, Koonawarra, Brownsville was the most common postcode.

Facebook and walking by again proved the most effective in families finding out about the events, with 80% of participants engaging through this at Dapto.

A further 8 children attended who were from Child Protection and thus unable to supply data. Both the Warrawong and Dapto event have families that have attended events in previous years with many participants arriving at the commencement of events and staying for the two hours of leaving briefly to shop and returning for further activities.

With the South Coast Child Wellbeing Network events being a regular annual event in the malls families have become familiar with the events. There are many incidental conversations occurring about parenting and early childhood needs, especially from young or single parents. Grandparents are also recognising the event and bringing their grandchildren to the events.

There were 14 cultural backgrounds identified by families with the majority identifying as Australian and then Aboriginal.

This venue also returned a very high reporting for learning about fun activities and services that can help with again slightly lower reporting for learning about services.

### **Nowra**

13 families returned a survey at this event. Whilst only two postcodes were represented this covers a large geographical area of the Shoalhaven including regional and rural areas, many of which experience low socioeconomic status, single parent families and high unemployment rates.

60 percent of families who responded to cultural background identified as Aboriginal. The Nowra event is strongly supported by Cullunghutti, South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation – Nowra and South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation Family Connect and Support Program to ensure the event offers culturally inclusive play opportunities and support services.

Three and a half was the average age of attendees which is slightly older than the other two venues.

As with the two northern events being in the centre was the most common means of engagement with 77% of attendees. Facebook only reached one person, otherwise it was being brought along by a friend.

All participants identified they had learnt new fun things to do with their young people and only one person was unsure if they learnt about services.

Whilst Nowra is a smaller event compared to the other venues both families and services report it to be a valuable part of the child protection calendar.

### **SCCWN Impact**

- **Strengthening Service Collaboration:** SCCWN has facilitated strong partnerships among over 20 organisations, enabling them to share resources, coordinate service delivery and provide more holistic support to children and families.
- **Expanding Community Engagement:** The annual family fun day has successfully reached and engaged hundreds of local families over the last 12 years, connecting them with essential support services in a welcoming and non-stigmatised environment.
- **Enhancing Professional Development:** SCCWN has facilitated strong partnerships among over 20 organisations, enabling them to share resources, coordinate service delivery and provide more holistic support to children and families.
- **Promoting Early Intervention:** The emphasis on early intervention has helped to identify and address issues faced by children and families at the earliest possible stage, improving long term outcomes.
- **Strengthening Community Resilience:** By fostering a collaborative and supportive network and partnering with other Interagency groups, the SCCWN has contributed to building the resilience of local communities, empowering them to better address the unique challenges faced by children and families in the region.

### **Membership**

All events are made possible due to the ongoing dedication and commitment of the organisations within the SCCWN.

Recognition goes to:

- Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District for financial support and the ISLHD School Link Coordinator who coordinates the whole Network, manages Network communication and supports Working Groups.
- ECTARC who manage finances, conference registrations, IT and supports Working Groups.
- University of Canberra- Social Work and Family Services Australia who led the Conference Working Group.
- Family Services Australia who leads the Warrawong Family Fun Day.
- Wollongong City Council and Big Fat Smile who led the Dapto Family Fun Day.
- William Campbell Foundation who leads the Nowra Family Fun Day and maintains the Website and Facebook page.
- CareSouth who manage media communications and support with events.

Any local services who support children, young people and their families within the Illawarra and Shoalhaven areas are invited to participate in SCCWN.

The participating services for 2025 were: Anglicare Family Mental Health Support Program, Barnardos Family Support and Communities 4 Children Services, Big Fat Smile Transition to School, CareSouth, Cullunghutti, Department of Education, ECTARC, Family Services Australia, Farmborough



Road Schools as Community Centre, Goodstart Early Learning, Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District School Link Program, Child Protection Counselling Services and Child Wellbeing Unit, South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation - Nowra, South Coast Medical Service Aboriginal Corporation Family Connect and Support Program, University of Canberra - Social Work, University of Wollongong - Pulse Kids Uni, William Campbell Foundation, Wollongong City Council.