



Municipal Early Years Plan 2019–2023

Building the foundations
for a brighter future



“Instead of raising children who turn out okay despite their childhood, let’s raise children who turn out extraordinary because of their childhood.” – L.R. Knost



“Parks should have animals and colours. This is a rainbow mouse”. – Scarlett, aged 5.

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Mayoral introduction

More than any other time in our lives, our early years help to shape who we will become. These years of a child's life are critical as their brains develop and social, cognitive and emotional skills are acquired. This is the time of life where actions to help children's development can make the greatest impact.

For the first time in Baw Baw Shire, our Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) covers children from 0-12 years of age. This brings the plan into alignment with Council's Youth Strategy, adopted in 2018, which covers young people from 12 years of age onwards.

We know that Baw Baw Shire is growing at a fast rate. At the 2016 census, Baw Baw Shire had 7,525 children under the age of 12, comprising 15.5 per cent of our total population. This is over 800 more children than at the previous census.

We are living in the fastest growing peri-urban municipality in the state. It's vitally important that we take a strategic approach to ensure that our children have the facilities and community services they need. We need to make sure that we have the infrastructure to deliver the services families need so that they can make the most of living in this fantastic part of Victoria.

We will continue to advocate to all levels of government to make sure that funding in Baw Baw Shire provides for our growing population of families.

This plan makes Council's role clear in the early years, whether it is in direct service delivery, provision of infrastructure, or in advocating on behalf of families. It sets out strong priorities for work in the early years and establishes how these priorities will be achieved.

On behalf of Council, I am very proud to present Building the foundations for a brighter future: Municipal Early Years Plan to you. I look forward to seeing Council working in partnership with the community to make Baw Baw Shire a wonderful place where our children can learn, develop and thrive.

Cr Danny Goss
Mayor (2019-20)





Child Safety Standards and children's voices

Baw Baw Shire Council is committed to the safety of all children and recognises it's legal and moral obligations to contact authorities when we are concerned about a child's safety.

Council unanimously adopted a Child Safety Policy solidifying the organisations commitment to uphold, endorse and promote the Victorian Government's seven principle-based Child Safe Standards.

The Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) has been developed within the boundaries and expectations of Council's Child Safe Policy and Statement of Commitment. The Policy is available to view at the following link <https://www.bawbawshire.vic.gov.au/Our-Community/Children-and-Families/Child-Safety-Standards>

Standard Seven of the Victorian Governments Child Safety Standards states that organisations must

"Children have the right to express their opinion, and have adults listen and take it seriously." - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 12.

Ensuring Child Safety – Statement of Commitment

- *Council is committed to providing and actively promoting a safe environment for children.*
- *Council has zero tolerance towards child abuse, and is committed to protecting the physical, emotional, cultural and social wellbeing of all children. Council has policies and systems to protect children, and all allegations and safety concerns will be treated seriously.*
- *Baw Baw Shire Council acknowledges that children's safety is a whole of community responsibility and is everyone's business.*

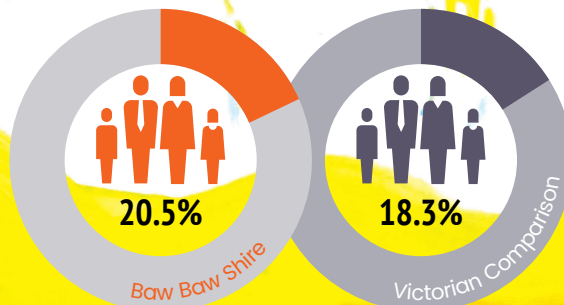
have strategies to promote the participation and empowerment of children. Encouraging children to speak up on matters that impact them, supports their developing sense of agency and impact, and also critically demonstrates that adults listen when children speak. This is essential messaging for children, who may need to reach out to adults to seek protection.

In order to involve children in the development to this strategy, a specific consultation plan was developed. Detail about the children's consultation process and results is included further on in this document.

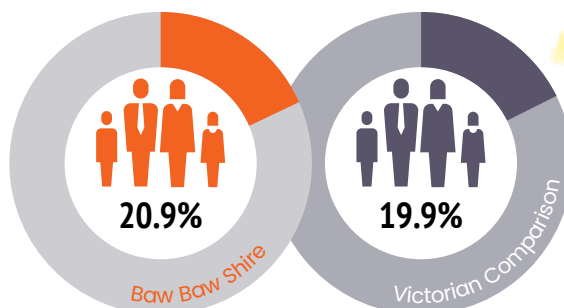
"Parks should have a massive, wormtastic slide".
- Alaynah, aged 5.

Baw Baw's Children

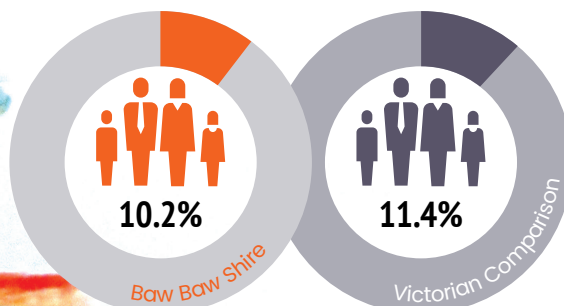
Low income (<\$650pw)
families in Baw Baw*



Children developmentally vulnerable
in one or more developmental areas**



Number of families
experiencing housing stress*

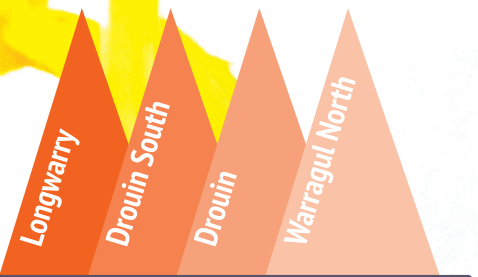


7,525

Number of children in Baw
Baw Shire aged 0-12*

Number of babies born in
Baw Baw in 2018/19:

634



Areas of highest
disadvantage*

* Australian Bureau of
Statistics, 2016

** Australian Early
Development Census,
2018

The importance of the early years: research and evidence

Over the past decade, there has been an explosion of research and evidence articulating the importance of the early years in development. The findings from two significant and influential papers are summarised below:

Understanding the nature and significance of early childhood: New evidence and its implications (2014)

This report presented a summary of evidence on what is known about child development – how children learn and what children need. Relevant findings include evidence that:

- What happens during the early postnatal years can also have life-long effects on the later achievements, social adjustments, mental health, physical health and longevity of individuals.
- The nature of the environments in which children spend their time shapes children's development for better or worse.

- Early learnings are critical. Learning and development are cumulative, with later development and learning building upon earlier development, with the result that the gaps between those doing well and those not doing well progressively widen.
- Healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child's relationships with the important people in his or her life, both within and outside the family.
- Economic analyses show that investments in the early years are more cost effective and beneficial than later investments, and that the costs of not intervening early are prohibitive.
- Discrepancies between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds emerge early, and progressively widen, with advantages and disadvantages accumulating throughout life.

The First 1,000 Days- An Evidence Paper (2017)

The Centre for Community Child Health (a research group of Murdoch Children's Research Institute) published The First Thousand Days evidence paper in September 2017. It showed:

- Experiences in early childhood have a lasting impact. The best opportunity to build a strong foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing occurs between conception to the end of a child's second year.
- The social and environmental conditions in which families are conceiving and raising children have a direct impact on a child's development.
- It is never too late to make changes that improve health and wellbeing.
- Raising healthy, happy children is a whole-of-community responsibility. A child's development is supported by positive relationships with friends and neighbours, and access to things like playgrounds, parks, shops and local services including child care, schools, health centres and libraries.
- Safe, cohesive, child-centred neighbourhoods and communities are important for early childhood development.



Political and policy context: State and Federal

The MEYP has been developed within the current policy context. There are several key policy documents which have influenced this Plan, including:

- Early Childhood Reform Plan 2017 – Education State
- Supporting Children and Families
- in the Early Years – A Compact between DET, DHHS and Local Government (represented by MAV) 2017 – 2027
- DHHS – Roadmap to Reform Strong Families Safe Children
- Victorian Child Safe Standards.

"It's a 3-storey playground so I can fit two slides on it ... a baby slide and a big boy's slide. It has a swing as well. You play up high ... it's scary up high and I like scary ... it's fun scary!" – Max, aged 5.



Local context: Council's role in the early years

The Municipal Association of Victoria articulates the role of local government in early years as falling under five key areas:

- Planning and coordination
- Service provision
- Facility planning
- Advocacy
- Strengthening community capacity.

The MEYP is a significant strategic planning document for Council in the early years. Through the planning process associated with developing, implementing and evaluating the MEYP, Council seeks to achieve the following benefits for the community:

- Provision of a long term strategic early years planning guide across all Council departments

“The importance of local government in leading local policies, developing and delivering programs and providing infrastructure that can influence the health, education and wellbeing of its younger population is well recognised.” – Municipal Association of Victoria, 2018.

Baw Baw Shire Council operates in all these areas.

Planning and coordination

Council has an integral and legislated role in the planning for services in the municipality. Recent strategic work carried out by Council impacting children and families includes:

- Baw Baw Shire Council Plan 2017–2021
- Youth Strategy – Building the Best Years 2018–2022
- Baw Baw Shire Recreation Strategy 2017–2027
- Disability Action Plan 2018–2022
- Municipal Early Years Infrastructure Plan 2017–2036
- Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2017–2021.

- Articulation of Council's role in the early years
- Engagement of partners in planning for the future
- Support for Council in making informed decisions and maximising resources
- Servicing as a basis for partnership and negotiation with other levels of government.

Service provision

Council's direct service delivery within the early years is through the Family and Children's Services (FaCS) department. This department operates predominately out of Council's facility at 144 Normanby Street, Warragul. The Maternal and Child Health service also consults from outreach offices in Trafalgar, Drouin, Neerim South, Yarragon and Erica.

“An informed, involved and connected community welcomes children and families. We want to encourage and support residents, local businesses and agencies to work together to contribute to better outcomes for all families and children.” – Mayor Cr Mikaela Power, 2019.

Facility planning

This involves planning, providing and maintaining a range of early years infrastructure. Council provides the physical infrastructure from which several early years services operate:

- Eight kindergartens
- Four Maternal and Child Health Centres
- Several buildings which house community playgroups
- The Warragul Leisure Centre, which provides occasional care

In addition, Council has responsibility (through leases with the Victorian Government's Department of Education and Training) for two school based early learning hub facilities:

- Drouin Primary Early Learning Centre
- Warragul Primary Early Learning Centre

Advocacy

Council regularly seeks and participates in advocacy opportunities in the early years. In recent years, Council has been

actively advocating for increased funding for early years infrastructure required in Baw Baw Shire to service the rapidly growing population.

Other advocacy work has included supporting the 'I Love Kinder' campaign, contributing to the review of the Victorian Child Safety Standards, and the Senate Inquiry into the delivery of quality and affordable early childhood Education and Care Services, as well as providing support to early years managers in their applications for funding.

Strengthening community capacity

All services and programs within the FaCS department are aimed at supporting and developing families' capacity to care for children, particularly for those experiencing vulnerability.

On a community level, one of the key capacity strengthening initiatives is the 'Family Friendly Baw Baw' program. This program aims to work with the community to continue to develop Baw Baw Shire into a safe and welcoming place for children and families.

Baw Baw Shire Council's Family and Children's Services

- Universal Maternal and Child Health Service
- Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service
- Family Day Care
- Supported playgroups
- New parent groups
- Positive Parenting Program
- Pre-school Field Officer Service
- Kindergarten Central Enrolment Scheme
- Baby capsule hire

Early Years Advisory Committee

In 2018, Council re-established the Early Years Advisory Committee (EYAC). The role of the EYAC is to provide information and advice to Council on early years matters, including (but not limited to):

- Play spaces for children (indoor and outdoor)
- Occasional care
- All abilities facilities
- Playgroups

- Kindergartens
- Indigenous early years literacy and health
- Supporting development in the 0-3 years age bracket.

The EYAC also provides specific feedback, advice and recommendations on Council projects and draft policies related to early years activities, programs and initiatives.

Previous MEYP successes

Council's previous Municipal Early Years Plan (2015-2018) articulated the following priority areas:

- Improve child development, health and wellbeing
- Advocating for a child friendly community
- Social connection and inclusion of all families

- Collaboration for the best early year's services
- Relationships and partnerships to support families and communities.

There has been a great deal of work over the life of this Plan, summarised in the document 'MEYP 2015-2018 Final report'.

"I would like the pool to look like this, with a frog, horse, bird and pig all squirting water, and butterfly rafts!"
- **Sophie, aged 4.**



Development of the current Municipal Early Years Plan

The MEYP was developed in consultation with Council's Early Years Advisory Committee (EYAC), Family and Children's Services team, and through engagement with the community.

"Childhood is a stage of life where investment has the greatest return and opportunities to intervene have the greatest impacts. A municipality that has a focus on children is one that benefits all members of the community." – Municipal Association of Victoria, 2018.

Early community consultation: Family Friendly Survey

In early 2019, a survey was widely distributed and promoted within the community. This survey was coordinated through the Family Friendly Baw Baw project, and asked the following questions:

- What does Family Friendly mean to you?
- What spaces, places or services in your area are family friendly?
- What are the places and facilities that need to be added in your area to make it more family friendly?
- What are the services that need to be added in your area to make it more family friendly?
- Do you have any other suggestions to make Baw Baw Family Friendly?

Early Years Advisory Committee priority and strategy drafting

Based on the results of the Family Friendly survey, and informed by early years data and statistics, the EYAC workshopped and drafted key priority areas and strategies for the plan.

Family Friendly community discussion

This event, held on 21 August was attended by eleven adult community members, and five children. The aim of this session was to further develop the notion of 'what is family friendly' and to explore what opportunities exist to further build a family friendly community.

Children's consultation

All primary schools in Baw Baw Shire were invited to participate in this project, with multiple options for engagement offered.

A total of three primary schools and four kindergartens participated:

- Warragul Primary School
- Drouin South Primary School
- Trafalgar Primary School
- Longwarry Preschool
- Warragul Community Preschool
- Oak Street Kindergarten
- Mary Beck Preschool

Children from these school and kindergartens participated in a mix of interviews, group discussions and creative, art-based projects.

Some questions that children were asked to consider included:

- What do you like about where you live?
- What could be done to make it a better place to live?
- If a genie could grant you one wish to do or change anything in your town, what would your wish be?
- What have you seen in other areas that would be good to have in Baw Baw Shire?
- What else would you like us to know about what children need in Baw Baw Shire?



“Consultation is more than just asking children for their ideas and views. It’s about listening to them, taking them seriously and ensuring their ideas and suggestions are considered. Involving children in decision-making means they can influence some of the things that affect them and offer a different perspective from adults. It supports adults in understanding children’s issues, enables policies and services to be reflective of childrens’ needs, and acknowledges their important role in society.” – Engaging Children in Decision Making: A Guide for Consulting Children, page 4.

The key themes from the children's engagement were:

The need for outdoor spaces with different levels of risk and challenge

This was the strongest theme heard across all age groups. Topics discussed were flying foxes, bigger slides, curly slides, and equipment for 'big people and little people'.

The need for clean public toilets

In the older age groups, they focussed on the cleanliness of Council facilities, especially public toilets.

Play spaces (including pools) should be interactive, not passive

Children want their play spaces to be interactive, especially with regard to water play. Water play was a feature of their ideal parks, and pools were imagined with multiple interactive water features.

Children's play spaces are used for connection (with friends, family)

As children spoke about spaces (recreation venues, parks, pools, etc), the recurring feature was their reference to other people. Parks were drawn with family members in play, described as being places to meet friends, and imaginary parks were designed so siblings could play together.

Colours and animals are important in children's worlds

Children's artwork and discussions had a high focus on the inclusion of colour and animals. They talked about colour in outdoor areas and how animals could be included in park design. Older children talked about dogs off leash areas, and animal rescue and welfare issues.

The safety of the environment is important to older children

Feelings of safety on public transport, and being able to safely walk around town is important to children in higher primary school grades.

The feedback from children has directly informed the development of this Plan, and direct quotes from children, along with a variety of artwork has been incorporated. The results of the consultation, including all artwork, has been developed as a record of engagement in "Having Our Say: Baw Baw's Children Speak".

Image: A word cloud image representing the comments from children consulted on this project. The bigger the word, the more references noted.

Municipal Early Years Plan

Priority area: Health and development

“Children’s physical and mental health are individually important, interrelated and central to their overall wellbeing. A child’s physical wellbeing impacts their mental health, just as their psychological wellbeing affects their physical health. Healthy young people are also more likely to flourish into healthy and happy adults. They are able to participate in their community, are better prepared to enter the workforce and provide a positive contribution to society.” – State of Victoria’s Children Report 2017.

Objective: Support the health, development, and wellbeing of children and families.

Strategy: Increase children’s opportunities to participate in physical activity and engage with the natural environment.

- Support and take a lead role in outdoor activities and initiatives including (but not limited to) Walk to School Day & Ride to School Day.
- Advocate for outdoor spaces, equipment and recreation facilities suitable for children for all children up to 12 years old.
- Advocate for the inclusion of sensory play areas in open space, more challenging play spaces and improved associated amenities.

Strategy: Provide a range of inclusive, accessible and culturally appropriate services and programs which are evidence based and responsive to the need of families and children.

- Facilitate supported playgroups across multiple locations, as determined by need.
- Encourage participation in Maternal and Child Health services, with a focus on improving attendance past the 12-month visit.
- Advocate for, and develop partnerships to enable the re-establishment and further development of early childhood Indigenous screening days.

Priority area:

Supports and services for families in a rapidly growing area

“The environment in which children grow up has a profound influence on their development, life choices, beliefs and ultimately health and wellbeing. Perhaps the most important environmental factors relate to our families. Families can provide protective resources, for example through warm and nurturing relationships, to draw upon during challenging periods. Conversely, they can increase the risk related to negative developmental outcomes due to things such as harsh and inconsistent parenting, exposure to family violence, promoting unhealthy behaviours and the effects of living in poverty.” – State of Victoria’s Children Report 2017.

Objective: Respond to local growth and change.

Strategy: Advocate to all levels of government for the provision of services, funding and infrastructure to meet the growing needs of our community.

- Participate in advocacy campaigns as appropriate and relevant to Baw Baw Shire.
- Proactively seek opportunities to raise awareness of the rapid growth in Baw Baw Shire and associated needs as a result.
- Respond to the State Government initiative to provide access to 3-year-old funded kindergarten.

Strategy: Collaborate between Council teams to facilitate development within Baw Baw that is family focussed and child friendly.

- Work with Council’s Infrastructure team to ensure that all new parks have shade coverage.

- Work with Council’s Strategic and Statutory planners to support and encourage family friendly development.

Strategy: Regularly review data to understand Baw Baw Shire’s rapidly changing community.

- Conduct an annual review of Council’s Municipal Early Years Infrastructure Plan.
- Undertake annual analysis of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data, determining areas of vulnerability and increased support needs, to inform program and service delivery.
- Engage with Gippsland Centre for Multicultural Services to understand Baw Baw’s changing cultural demographic and support needs.

Priority area: Children's learning

“An appetite for lifelong learning is cultivated from an early age. Positive health and wellbeing is one of the building blocks that enables a child to fully engage with school life from the beginning, and to develop their individual skills and interests to the fullest potential.” – State of Victoria's Children Report 2017, page 159.

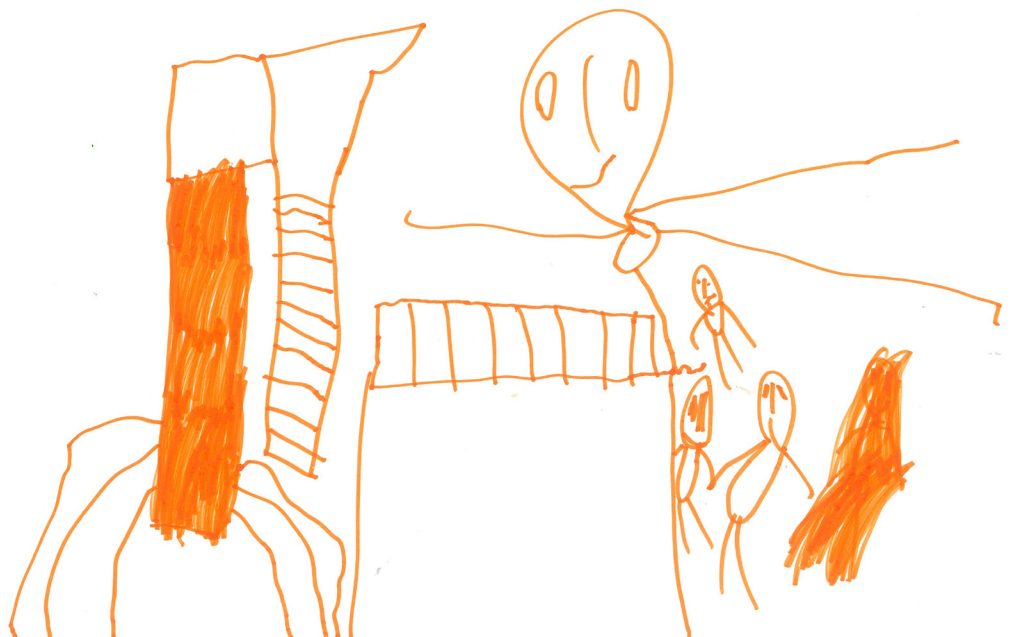
Objective: Collaborate and develop partnerships to support learning.

Strategy: Foster partnerships to deliver innovative, and evidence-based learning initiatives.

- Engage Paint the Town ReAD to deliver services to Baw Baw, based on need.
- Partner with West Gippsland Library Service to co-deliver literacy programs.
- Work with Department of Health and Human Services to increase Early Start Kindergarten uptake in enrolments.

Strategy: Develop local partnerships to support the delivery of programs outside of Council's scope of service.

- Support partners to investigate options for vacation care in Baw Baw Shire.
- Partner with West Gippsland Healthcare Group, Food Security Strategic Planning Working Group and Baw Baw Food Movement groups to develop and deliver food and nutrition education.



Priority area:

Community safety and accessibility

“Communities are a key environmental influence on children’s health and wellbeing. They provide families and children with a range of protective resources and supports to draw upon in times of need. Positive social and physical community environments can model and encourage healthy behaviours. Conversely, a lack of safety or fragmented communities can be harmful for children. For example, children might not be able to engage in outdoor activities due to poor perceptions of safety, may experience social isolation or be exposed to crime.” – State of Victoria’s Children Report 2017, page 11.

Objective: Create a safe, accessible and family friendly community for all.

Strategy: Ensure families have access to information and know where to go to access services they need.

- Continued support and expansion of the Family Friendly shops initiative.
- Continue to develop and expand the Family Friendly Baw Baw project, based on community feedback.
- Review Council’s website to ensure family information is easily accessible and up to date and explore opportunities to create ‘family friendly’ calendar.
- Advocate for the inclusion of children’s voices in Council decision making regarding projects that may impact them.

Strategy: Families can access family friendly spaces to support their needs.

- Investigate options for change and feed facilities and breastfeeding spaces across Baw Baw Shire.
- Provision of the FaCS baby feed and change van for community events across Baw Baw Shire.
- Work with other areas of Council to ensure the provision of appropriate toilet facilities.

Strategy: Increase safety for children and families in Baw Baw Shire.

- Advocate for increased footpath connections throughout townships.
- Actively promote child safety in partnership with community groups and organisations, and deliver child safe training to community groups, as requested.

Priority area:

Connection and inclusion

“The social environments we live in are vital to our health and wellbeing. Respectful relationships focus on promoting respect, positive attitudes and behaviours to build healthy relationships, resilience and confidence. Embedding a culture of respect and equality in young people leads to positive impacts on their mental health, relationships with peers and adults, and long-term developmental outcomes.” – State of Victoria’s Children Report 2017, page 89.

Objective: Support the social connection and inclusion of all children and families.

Strategy: Facilitate multiple opportunities for families to connect within the community.

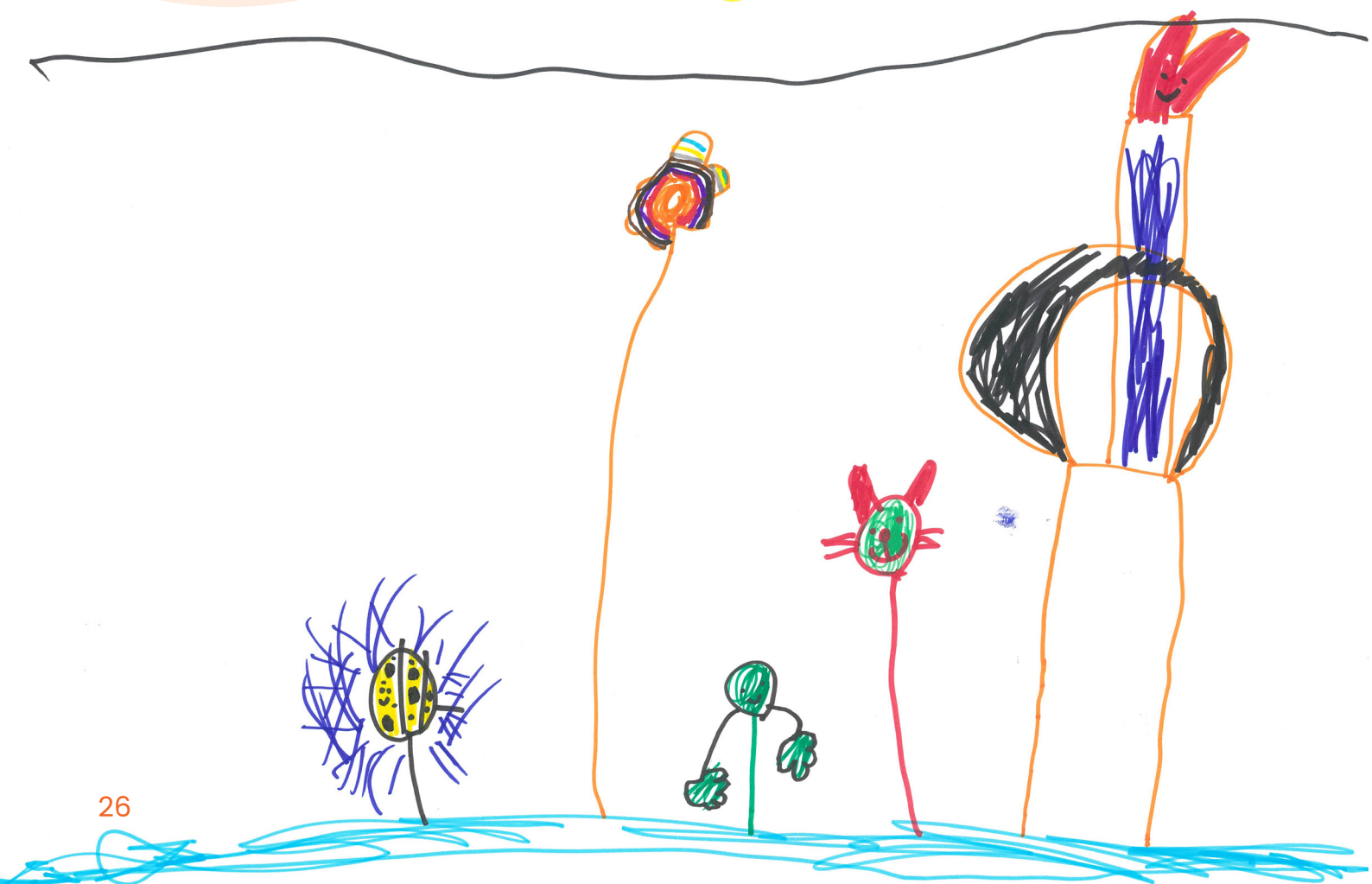
- Hold an annual children’s expo or event.
- Develop processes to support the engagement of working parents in early years services and programs.
- Explore opportunities to encourage fathers to engage in Early Years Services.
- Provide support for newly establishing playgroups to secure appropriate venues.
- Advocate for broader scope for Parent Group funding to support families to connect, including focussed parent groups (kinship care groups, grandparent groups etc.).

Strategy: Provide support for families experiencing vulnerability.

- Actively participate in Food Security Working Group, and activities as appropriate.
- Encourage and support children and families experiencing vulnerability to access and engage in supported playgroups.
- Work to raise community awareness of developmental outcomes for children impacted by family violence.

*"This is what I want a pool
to look like. A love heart,
frog and a cat building, with
rainbow flowers and a beetle
that squirts water!"*
- Lucy, aged 4.

Lucy



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