FREE KINDER FEES

QUALITY AREA 7 – GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

PURPOSE

This policy will provide clear guidelines for:

- How services comply with the Free Kinder initiative

POLICY STATEMENT

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Sparkways is committed to:

- supporting the Victorian Government's Free Kinder initiative
- increasing access to quality Kindergarten programs for all Victorian children
- ensuring there are no financial barriers for families wishing to access an early childhood program for their child/children
- maintaining confidentiality in relation to the financial circumstances of parents/guardians

SCOPE

This policy applies to the approved provider, persons with management or control, nominated supervisor / centre director, persons in day-to-day charge, early childhood teachers, educators, staff, and parents/guardians.

RESPONSIBILITIES	Approved provider and persons with management or control	Nominated supervisor and persons in day-to-day charge	Early childhood teacher, educators and all other staff	Parents/guardians	Contractors, volunteers and students
R indicates legislation requirement, and should not be deleted					
Implementing and reviewing this policy in consultation with parents/guardians, the Nominated Supervisor and staff, and in line with the requirements of DE's Free Kinder initiative *(refer to Definitions)*	**R**	√	√	√	
Ensuring that policies and procedures are in place for the payment of fees (if applicable) and the provision of a statement of fees charged by the service *(Regulation 168)*, and take reasonable steps to ensure those policies and procedures are followed *(Regulation 170)*	**R**	√			
Ensuring that families are informed of the operating hours including term dates, planned closures and additional hours to account for closures.	**R**	√			
Ensuring families are informed of the total annual fee amount, including any applicable fees for e.g. excursions and any additional hours	**R**	√			
Reimbursing families in full for enrolment deposits that have already been paid upon acceptance of enrolment (if applicable)	**R**	√			
Ensuring families are not charged any compulsory out-of-pocket levies or maintenance fees (voluntary fundraising and payments/donations are permitted)	**R**	√			
Ensuring families are only charged for optional Kinder programs hours that are over and above the 15 funded hours per week (600 hours per year) and/or "wrap around" care *(refer to Definitions)*	**R**	√			
Ensuring any non-funded positions are enrolled in accordance with the Funding Guidelines *(refer to Sources)*	**R**	√			
Providing communication to families explaining their access to one year of three-year-old and one of four-year-old funded kindergarten program	**R**	√			
Ensuring families that attend both sessional Kinder and a long day care service **nominate and document** which service the child will participate in the funded Kinder program	**R**	√		√	
Ensuring that any surplus funding is used in line with acceptable uses of kindergarten funding, including to promote increased participation and/or enhance program quality	**R**	√			
Ensuring any voluntary parent payments/donations are explicitly agreed to in writing and receipted	**R**	√			

RESPONSIBILITIES	Approved provider and persons with management or control	Nominated supervisor and persons in day-to-day charge	Early childhood teacher, educators and all other staff	Parents/guardians	Contractors, volunteers and students
Charging families only for an occasional special event/ excursion that occur outside the normal program/curriculum	**R**	√	√		
Ensuring that any child that is eligible for Early Start Kindergarten is enrolled at the service and recorded on the Arrival system	**R**	√	√		
Collecting all relevant information regarding those with entitlement to concessions and recording it on the Arrival system	**R**	√	√		
Ensuring that the *Free Kinder Fees Policy* is readily accessible at the service *(Regulation 171)*	**R**	√			
Providing all parents/guardians with information about Free Kinder *(refer to Attachment 1)*	**R**	√			
Providing all parents/guardians with a statement of additional hours fees and charges to families that have opted in to the additional- hour/wrap around care *(refer to Attachment 2)* upon enrolment of their child, if applicable **NOTE:** parents should also be advised that enrolling for hours over 15 is optional and families can choose to only enrol for 15 hours and receive this program at no cost.	**R**	√			
Providing all parents/guardians with an additional hours payment fee agreement *(refer to Attachment 3)*, if applicable	**R**	√			
Informing parents of any action that will be taken if additional hours fees are not paid, if applicable *(refer to Attachment 3)*	**R**	√			
Reading the Sparkways Free Kinder information for families *(refer to Attachment 1)*, the Statement of Additional Hours Fees and Charges *(refer to Attachment 2)*, and the Additional Hours Fee Payment Agreement *(refer to Attachment 3)* if applicable				√	
Signing and complying with the Additional Hours Fee Payment Agreement *(refer to Attachment 3),* if applicable				√	
Ensuring any additional hours fees are collected and receipted	**R**	√			
Notifying the approved provider if experiencing difficulties with the payment of additional hours fees				√	
Providing agreement in writing if any additional payments are made to Sparkways				√	

RESPONSIBILITIES	Approved provider and persons with management or control	Nominated supervisor and persons in day-to-day charge	Early childhood teacher, educators and all other staff	Parents/guardians	Contractors, volunteers and students
Complying with the service's *Privacy and Confidentiality Policy* regarding financial and other information received, including in relation to the payment/non-payment of additional hours fees	**R**	√	√	√	
Notifying parents/guardians a minimum of 14 days of any proposed changes to the additional hours' fees charged, or the way in which the fees are collected *(Regulation 172(2))*, ideally providing one term's notice.	**R**	√			
Informing the approved provider of any complaints or concerns that have been raised regarding additional hours fees at the service		√	√		
Referring parents'/guardians' questions in relation to this policy to the approved provider.		√	√		

BACKGROUND AND LEGISLATION

BACKGROUND

The Best Start, Best Life reform will help all Victorian children dream even bigger through increased access to quality early childhood education and care. A critical part of the reform is Free Kinder, which will support access to two years of high-quality Kinder programs for all Victorian children. All families with a child enrolled in a funded Kinder program are eligible for Free Kinder, this includes both 3 and 4-year-old Kinder programs.

Free Kinder supports families to access a funded Kinder program by:

- providing a free 15-hour program to four-year-old children enrolled at a sessional service
- providing a free 5-to-15-hour program to three-year-old children enrolled at a sessional service (subject to the length of funded program offered)
- offsetting the funded Kinder program component of parent fees for three and four-year-old children enrolled at a long day care service

Free Kinder supports every Victorian child to get the best start in life no matter where they live. Research shows that play-based learning is a powerful way to support children's learning and development. Two years of early learning is a crucial part of their educational journey, these benefits last into the school years and beyond.

Regulation 168(2)(n) of the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011 requires that funded services have a comprehensive written fees policy, and the content of this policy must be communicated to

families. Any voluntary parent donations and/or fundraising must comply with the Free Kinder subsidy guidelines and be responsive to the local community.

LEGISLATION AND STANDARDS

Relevant legislation and standards include but are not limited to:

- Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006 (Vic)
- Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic)
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)
- Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010
- Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011: Regulation 168(2)(n)
- Equal Opportunity Act 1995 (Vic)
- National Quality Standard

The most current amendments to listed legislation can be found at:

- Victorian Legislation – Victorian Law Today: www.legislation.vic.gov.au
- Commonwealth Legislation – Federal Register of Legislation: www.legislation.gov.au

DEFINITIONS

The terms defined in this section relate specifically to this policy. For regularly used terms e.g. Approved provider, Nominated supervisor, Notifiable complaints, Serious incidents, Duty of care, etc. refer to the Definitions file of the Sparkways policy catalogue.

Additional Hours/Wrap around care: care that is provided by a kindergarten service to kindergarten children outside of the 15 hours per week program. Wrap around care fees are not funded by the Victorian Government but may be covered by CCS (refer to Definitions).

Approved child care: Approved child care services are services that have Australian Government approval to receive the Child Care Subsidy *(refer to Definitions)* on behalf of eligible parents. Approved child care includes centre-based day care, including long day care and occasional care, family day care, outside school hours care and in-home care.

Child care subsidy (CCS): A Commonwealth Government means tested subsidy to assist eligible families with the cost of child care. Payments are paid directly to approved child care providers. Further information can be found at: www.education.gov.au/child-care-subsidy

Early Start Kinder: A funding program that enables three-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children known to Child Protection to attend a Kinder program that is planned and delivered by an early childhood teacher for up to 15 hours per week. details are available at: www.vic.gov.au/early-start-kindergarten. Children that are eligible for Early Start Kinder (ESK) will continue to be enrolled, this ensure that service providers receive all funding entitlements and that these children have access to 15 funded hours of Kinder across Victoria. ESK enrolments contribute to School Readiness Funding (SRF) calculations for service providers. It also allows the Department to continue to monitor efforts to engage the most vulnerable children in Kinder across Victoria and provide additional targeted support where required through SRF or Early Childhood LOOKOUT.

Waitlist fee: A fee for when families register their child directly with a service (not part the councils central registration and enrolment scheme). This fee will not be refunded as it is not part of the Free Kinder subsidy, and not related to the fee charged for delivery of the kindergarten program. A service may charge for one-off excursions/incursions, and registration fees (sometimes called waitlist fees). Waitlist fees are returned to families once they have accepted a kindergarten place.

Excursion/service event charge: An additional charge required to meet the cost of special events or excursions that occur in response to emerging children's program needs. Events that are planned ahead and are included as an expenditure item in the service's budget do not incur this additional charge *(refer to Excursions and Service Events Policy)*

Fees: A charge for program hours over and above the 15 funded hours per week (600 per year) and/or wrap around care.

Free Kinder: A Victorian Government Best Start, Best Life initiative providing Free Kinder programs for four-year-old and three-year-old children in funded services, that have opted into the initiative.

Free Kinder supports families to access a funded kindergarten program by:

- providing a free 15-hour program to 4-year-old children enrolled at a sessional service
- providing a free 5 to 15-hour program to 3-yearold children enrolled at a sessional service (subject to the length of funded program offered)
- offsetting the funded kindergarten program component of parent fees for 3 and 4-year-old children enrolled at a long day care service.

Funded Kindergarten: For service's that have not opted for Free Kinder, the Victorian Government provides funding to support children to access a high-quality kindergarten program in the two years before they start school. The funding is a contribution towards meeting the cost of the kindergarten program. Funded kindergartens charge fees to help meet the cost of running kindergarten programs. Fees are set by individual kindergartens and depend on things like how many hours children attend and whether there are extra costs such as excursions.

Enrolment deposit: A charge to secure a place that has been offered in a program at the service. This should not act as a barrier to enrolling for any families. Services must ensure that families understand that the enrolment deposits will only be refunded if the child commences in the service.

Pre-Prep priority cohort: From 2026, between 16 and 25 hours of Pre-Prep will be available to:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- children from a refugee or asylum seeker background
- children who have had contact with Child Protection
- children who were supported by Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) or Access to Early Learning (AEL) in their Three-Year-Old Kindergarten year.

Pre-Prep hours for this group of priority cohort children increase to up to 30 hours from 2028.

Voluntary parent/guardian payment/donation: A voluntary payment/donation for items not directly related to the provision of the children's program. Explicit and written agreement from a parent is required for any voluntary payments. Attendance at the service is not conditional on this payment.

SOURCES AND RELATED POLICIES

SOURCES

- Best Start Best Life: https://www.vic.gov.au/give-your-child-the-best-start-in-life
- The Kindergarten Funding Guide (Department of Education): www.vic.gov.au/kindergarten-funding-guide
- Resources for Funded Kinders: https://www.vic.gov.au/resources-funded-kindergartens

RELATED POLICES

- Compliments and Complaints
- Delivery and Collection of Children
- Early Learning & Care Fees
- Enrolment and Orientation
- Excursions, Regular Outings and Service Events
- Governance and Management of the Service
- Inclusion and Equity
- Privacy and Confidentiality

EVALUATION

In order to assess whether the values and purposes of the policy have been achieved, the approved provider will:

- seek feedback from people affected by the policy regarding its effectiveness, particularly in relation to affordability, flexibility of payment options and procedures for the collection of fees
- monitor the implementation, compliance, complaints and incidents in relation to this policy
- keep the policy up to date with current legislation and government policy, research, policy and best practice
- revise the policy and procedures as part of the service's policy review cycle, or as required
- notifying all stakeholders affected by this policy at least 14 days before making any significant changes to this policy or its procedures, unless a lesser period is necessary due to risk *(Regulation 172 (2))*.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1: Free Kinder information for families
- Attachment 2: Statement of additional hours fees and charges
- Attachment 3: Additional hours fee agreement

AUTHORISATION

This policy was confirmed by Sparkways on 07/10/2025

REVIEW DUE: October 2026

ATTACHMENT 1 – FREE KINDER INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

1. General information

Kinder programs for four-year-old and eligible three-year-old children in Victorian Government funded services will be free as part of the Best Start, Best Life reform.

This investment will save families up to $2,500 for each child enrolled in a participating funded Kinder program.

DE also provides funding to assist eligible three-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, Asylum seeker and refugee children and children known to Child Protection, to access kindergarten programs.

2. What free Kinder means at our service

Sparkways has opted in to the Free Kinder initiative. Applicable parent fees are outlined below:

- Funded sessional Kinder for 3-year-old children (up to 15 hours per week) – no parent fee
- Funded sessional Kinder for 4-year-old children (15 hours per week) - no parent fee
- Kinder in Early Learning & Care for 3 and 4 -year-old children – parent fee will be reduced by the Free Kinder Funding

3. Other Charges

Other charges that may be levied by Sparkways are:

- **Excursion/service event charge (outside of the funded program):** At times throughout the year an additional excursion(s) or event(s) may be arranged where it is considered relevant to the service's program and the children's interests. At this time any additional costs to families are taken into consideration before a decision is made *(refer to Excursions and Service Events Policy)*.
  Late collection charge: Sparkways reserves the right to implement a late collection charge when parents/guardians are frequently late in collecting a child from the service. See point 4 below.

4. Additional Kinder Hours / Wrap Around (after kinder) care fees

Some Sparkways sessional Kinder services may provide additional kinder hours or after kinder care outside of the 15 hours per week (600 hours per year) sessional Kinder program. Fees are payable for the additional hours or care.

Families have the option of only enrolling for 15 hours and being charged no additional fees.

5. Late Collection of Children and Late Fees

If a parent/carer fails to pick up a child, 15 minutes after the closure of the centre, staff will attempt to contact the parents/carers. If no contact can be made, the 'Authorised Persons to Collect' as per the Enrolment Form will be contacted to collect the child.

If the child has not been collected within 60 minutes of the closure of the service, and staff are unable to contact the parents/carers or a person on the authorised to collect list, staff will contact the regional Child Protection branch from the Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) and advise them of the situation. If this occurs, the child will be collected by a DFFH representative and the parent/carer will be required to liaise with DFFH to arrange collection of their child.

The procedure for late collection of children and late fees is as follows:

1. Staff will issue the family with a first verbal notification and provide a hard copy of this late fee policy. Parents/Carers will be asked to sign the late book or a late form to acknowledge the discussion has taken place.
2. Staff will issue the family with a second verbal notification. Parents/Carers will be asked to sign the late book or a late form to acknowledge the discussion has taken place.
3. Staff will notify the family of the applicable late fee which will be charged by Sparkways. Sparkways will issue a Statement that will include the late fee, payable within 14 days. Late fees are detailed below.

Nominal late fees

Late fees are charged in 15-minute blocks, or part thereof after closure of the centre. Late fees are charged at $20.00 per 15-minute block.

6. Fundraising and voluntary parent payment/donations

Not all service costs are covered by funded fees. Fundraising is undertaken to meet the balance and/or pay for additional items for the service. While **participation in fundraising/donation is voluntary**, the support of every family is encouraged. Fundraising activities are also an opportunity for families and communities to come together.

7. Subsidies

Child Care Subsidy (CCS) – Early Learning and Care Services

Child Care Subsidy (CCS) is an Australian Government subsidy that can assist eligible families with the costs of childcare at an approved child care provider. Sparkways is an approved care provider.

Approved child care are providers that meet certain standards and requirements, and are approved by the Australian Government. Approved child care providers must:

- hold the required approvals or licences to provide child care in the state or territory that the service/s operate in
- ensure the provider and any individual who is or will be a Person with Management or Control of the Provider is fit and a proper person to administer the CCS (requirements set out in Section 194E of A New Tax System (Family Assistance) Act 1999.
- be financially viable and is likely to remain so
- ensure that required fit and proper checks are carried out for each Person with Management or Control of the Provider, Persons with Responsibility for Day-to-Day Operation of the Service and In-Home Care and Family Day Care Educators

The amount of subsidy received is determined by the circumstances of the applicant's including the family income, the hourly rate cap and the hours of activity undertaken by the parents. Further information for parents can be found here: https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/child-care-subsidy

Early Learning and Care providers that offer funded Kinder as part of the Early Learning & Care program are required to directly offset the full payment of the Free Kinder initiative from parents' out of pocket fees (after CCS is applied). Fee reductions will be made proportionally across the year to families' bills, i.e. fortnightly or monthly. Only children receiving a funded Kinder place at Sparkways, led by a qualified teacher, are eligible under this initiative.

Exclusions and exceptions: Not available for providers that primarily provide an early educational program to children in the year that is two years before grade one (preschool or Kinder).

Please refer to the *Early Learning & Care Fees and Payments Policy*, for full information regarding Early Learning & Care Fees.

8. Payment of fees for additional Kinder hours / wrap around (after kinder) care - only applicable to sessional services that provide the additional hours and/or care

Fees are payable for additional kinder hours and after kinder care (where applicable).

Sparkways will regularly review payment options and procedures to ensure that they are inclusive and sensitive to families' cultural and financial situations.

Fees will be invoiced to parents/guardians directly and must be paid by the date indicated on the invoice. Each invoice will be accompanied by payment instructions. For children enrolled after the commencement of a term, a pro rata invoice will be issued and must be paid in full within 14 days of the child's commencement at the service. Receipts will be provided for all fee payments.

Parents/guardians experiencing difficulty in paying fees are requested to contact the Nominated Supervisor to arrange a suitable alternative payment plan. The *Privacy and Confidentiality Policy* of the service will be complied with at all times in relation to a family's financial/personal circumstances.

9. Unpaid fees for additional Kinder hours / wrap around (after kinder) care - only applicable to sessional services that provide the additional hours and/or care

Following up overdue or unpaid fees places a large administration burden and cost on the Centre. Paying fees on time helps maintain the ongoing viability of the centres' and reduces costs. All fees not paid by the due date may incur a weekly late payment fee of $22.00 (inc. GST).

An account is overdue when payment hasn't been made by the due date specified on the statement.

If an account is overdue, the family will be notified and advised that:

- the account must be paid in full
- a late payment fee of $22 (inc. GST) may be added to the account and will be added each week until the account is paid in full
- failure to pay the account in full may result in their child's after care place being forfeited
- if not resolved within 14 days, the service may stop their child's care. The debt including any late payment charges may be handed over to the company's debt collection agency for processing
- to please contact their Nominated Supervisor if they are experiencing any difficulties paying their fees so a payment plan can be put in place. Payment plans will cover their existing weekly childcare fees and an additional amount to pay off the incurred debt. The additional payment will be worked out in consultation with the Nominated Supervisor
- No further after care enrolments of children from the family will be accepted until all outstanding fees have been paid

10. Refund of fees for additional Kinder hours / wrap around (after kinder) care - only applicable to sessional services that provide the additional hours and/or care

Additional Kinder and wrap around hours are non-refundable (exceptional circumstances may apply – these are at the discretion of the Executive Manager). There will be no refund of these fees in the following circumstances:

- a child's short-term illness
- public holidays
- family holiday during operational times
- closure of the service for one or more days when a qualified educator is absent, and a qualified reliever is not available
- closure of the service for staff training days
- closure of the service due to extreme and unavoidable circumstances.

In addition, there will be no refund where a family chooses not to send their child to the program for the maximum number of hours for which they are enrolled.

11. Notification of fee changes during the year for additional Kinder hours/wrap around (after kinder) care - only applicable to sessional services that provide the additional hours and/or care

Fees set for the year would only be reviewed in extraordinary circumstances, for example, if attendance rates fall below the budget 'break even' point. Parents/guardians will be notified one

term in advance of any required fee increase and will be offered the option to request a payment plan.

12. Support services

Families experiencing financial hardship may require access to family support services. Sparkways can provide information to families on accessing these services, including making referrals if appropriate.

ATTACHMENT 2

Statement of Additional Hours Fees and Charges

Additional Kinder Hours and Wrap Around (After Kinder) Care

[Service Name] - [Year]

After Kinder Care Fee schedule (delete if not relevant)

Day	After Care Session Time	Daily Fee	Term Fee

Additional Kinder Hours Fee schedule (delete if not relevant)

Group	Day	Kinder Session Time	Daily Fee	Term Fee

Payment of fees

Invoices will be issued fortnightly and must be paid by the due date.

Child Care Subsidy (CCS)

For information on the Child Care Subsidy, *refer to Free Kinder Information for Families*.

Late collection charge

Sparkways reserves the right to implement a late collection charge when parents/guardians are frequently late in collecting a child *(refer to Free Kinder Information for Families)*.

ATTACHMENT 3

Additional Hours Fee Agreement
Additional Kinder Hours and Wrap around (After Kinder) Care – Sessional Services

Please complete this form and return to Sparkways by xx/xx/xxxx

Fee payment agreement - 2023

Parent/s or Guardian/s Full Name/s:			
Child/ren's Full Name/s:			
Service: Additional Kinder Hours or After Kinder Care	Day Attending	Session Times	Daily Fee

- I/we acknowledge that the additional Kinder hours / after kinder care service is a fee-paying service.
- I/we agree to pay 2 week's fees (one billing period) in advance prior to commencing the relevant service and remain one billing period in advance at all times
- I/we understand that fees are non-refundable.
- I/we agree that if our activity and financial circumstances change, we will immediately notify Centrelink to ensure our Child Care Subsidy entitlements are up to date
- I/we acknowledge that if fees are not paid by the due date, Sparkways will implement the late payment of fees procedures, as outlined in the Fee Information for Families, which could result in the withdrawal of my/our child's place at the service and no further enrolments until the outstanding fees are paid.
- I/we agree that if my/our financial circumstances change and I/we am/are unable to pay as agreed, I/we will immediately notify the Nominated Supervisor to discuss alternative payment options.
- I/we acknowledge that I/we have received and read the service's Fee information for families, which outlines the procedure for payment of fees.
- I/we Agree to pay fees while the child is absent. Examples include annual leave, public holidays, illness, and closure due to unforeseen circumstances.
- I/we acknowledge a late fee of $22 will be charged to families for late payment of their account. This charge will be added each week until the account is paid in full.
- I/we agree to collect my child/ren from Sparkways prior to closing time and acknowledge that late collection fees are charged at $20 per 15-minute block.
- I/we agree to give 2 week's written notice of when my child/children will be leaving the additional Kinder hours or after care service.

Signature/s (parent/guardian):	
Date:	
Full Name/s of Child/Children:	

Note: invoices, receipts and collection of fees will be in accordance with the Sparkways Early Learning & Care Fees *Policy*