

A Place of Belonging for Children and Families

Discover how a unique child and family hub in Taree is transforming the way families connect, play, and access support.

Link to YouTube video: [Welcome to First Steps Count Child and Community Centre](#)



Can you tell us a little bit about the First Steps Count Child and Community Centre and the community it serves?

At [First Steps Count](#), we welcome families with children aged 0–12 into beautiful indoor and outdoor play spaces inspired by nature. In Taree, too many families face barriers to accessing support when they need it. These barriers are often the legacy of historic and current policies that have created distrust in services and contributed to intergenerational trauma and disadvantage, factors that continue to affect family functioning, child development, and parenting.

First Steps Count was established to provide a safe, welcoming environment where families feel comfortable to come and play, connect, and belong. From this foundation, our staff build non-judgmental, trusting relationships by walking alongside families, listening deeply, and connecting them with the right supports at the right time. With a variety of services and programs operating from the hub, we are able to bring supports

in to meet families where they are, rather than expecting them to navigate complex systems alone.

What makes FSC unique as a child and family hub?

First Steps Count was intentionally designed with biophilic principles, bringing nature into the built environment to promote health, wellbeing, and healing. The experience of being in the space is difficult to capture in words; we encourage visitors to come and feel it for themselves.

The Centre was shaped through extensive community consultation and co-design, including the *Many Hands: Build Create Unite* community art project, which embedded children's artwork and designs into the walls of the building. This sense of ownership and belonging is a hallmark of the hub.



Another unique feature is our support for families with children up to age 12. While the early years and the First 2000 Days remain a critical focus, the community recognised a gap in ongoing parenting support as children grow. First Steps Count bridges that gap, ensuring families can continue to access services and remain engaged with education.

In addition to our child and family services, First Steps Count also operates as a room-hire business, generating revenue to support operational costs and contribute to long-term sustainability.



How did your team become involved in the STARS for Kids research?

As an active partner in [Mid Coast 4 Kids](#), First Steps Count was exploring local experiences with before-school screenings for children when we came across a research article about the Rockdale Hub in Sydney. I recognised the name of Professor Sue Woolfenden, one of the authors, from her time at Sydney Children's Hospital, so I reached out to Sue to share the work of First Steps Count and Mid Coast 4 Kids, and from that connection the STARS for Kids project was born.

This collaboration led to a STARS Research Facilitator being embedded in Taree, working alongside FSC staff in a strengths-based, relational way that reflects our values and commitment to community-led practice.

Most families first come to First Steps Count simply for a play, to meet friends, get out of the house, or connect with new people. Many return again and again because of how welcoming the space feels. By the third or fourth visit, our staff can often identify families who may be seeking additional support.

Our Navigator, Victoria, spends most of her time “out on the floor,” engaging directly with families, listening to their needs, and offering gentle guidance toward the right supports.

We host a wide range of programs delivered by partner organisations, promoted through our Facebook page and word of mouth. These include, Communities for Children funded programs such as *Little Explorers Supported Playgroup*, *Mother Nature & Me*, *Being a Parent*, and other programs, including *Wellbeing 4 Kids*, *Alongside U*, *Legal Aid*, and the *New Parents Group*.

We also run in-house activities such as our garden program, a women's art group, and after-school or school holiday activities. More recently, in response to community

demand, we introduced counselling through Victims Support Services—a service that has been met with high uptake.

Our approach is intentionally flexible and evolving, ensuring programs remain responsive to community needs.

Can you share an example of something that has worked particularly well at FSC in supporting children and families?

At First Steps Count, relationships come first. Building trust takes time, and it has taken nearly two years to establish strong connections with a core group of families who now see the hub as a regular part of their lives. This trust is the foundation for engagement with more formal supports.

A great example is our Women's Art Group. It began informally, when staff noticed a group of mums who would meet for coffee after school drop-off. We recognised an opportunity to create a group where these women could gather with purpose, learn new skills, and share their experiences. Over time, the group has flourished, becoming a safe and supportive space for women to teach one another, form friendships, and talk about parenting and life.

For us, supporting parents is a key protective factor in keeping children safe and thriving. This group exemplifies how small beginnings, grounded in relationships, can grow into something with deep impact.

How has co-location and collaboration between services benefited families?

Co-location allows us to bring services in when they are needed, reducing the burden on families to navigate referrals or repeat their story multiple times. Our Centre Leader and Navigator play a key role in coordinating this process, ensuring the right services are present at the right time.

Collaboration is still evolving, but already we see families benefiting from a more seamless experience. As the hub matures, we are committed to strengthening these collaborative practices, so families experience an integrated, coordinated network of care.

Community Voice and Cultural Governance

How is the voice of the local community – including Aboriginal families and Elders – reflected in the design or delivery of services at FSC?

Community voice has been central from the outset. During construction, we spoke with families across the neighbourhood and wider community about what they needed from a hub. A recurring theme was the importance of feeling safe and welcome. This has guided both the physical design of the Centre and the way we engage with every visitor. One parent described it best: *"There's no judgement at First Steps Count."*

Early on, a Yarning Circle provided cultural guidance around awareness and safety. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are integral to the life of the Centre, and local Elders have long held leadership roles on the First Steps Count Board. Today, their wisdom and guidance continue through the Aboriginal Community Consultation Group (ACCG), which also advises STARS for Kids research and partnerships.

The Centre is infused with community-created artwork, embedding children's and families' contributions into its very walls. Services also co-developed a *Working Together Agreement*, a clear statement of how we want to be with each other in this space. Families later co-created a *Being Together Agreement* in their own language, which is proudly displayed in the family room.

We maintain ongoing conversations with families about what's working and what we might do differently. For example, feedback about our Garden Project is currently displayed on one of our walls, another way of keeping community voice alive within the hub.

What role does the Aboriginal Community Consultation Group (ACCG) play in guiding the Hub and research?

The ACCG meets monthly to discuss key topics and guide decision-making, particularly regarding the STARS for Kids research. It also provides broader advice about opportunities for First Steps Count, including partnerships and funding, with a strong focus on supporting Aboriginal families.

The group is facilitated by our on-site STARS Research Facilitator, a tremendous asset to the hub. Having a dedicated role for research and data collection ensures that planning and service delivery remain informed by community voice in real time.

Experience with the Research Project

What has your experience been like as a research partner in the STARS for Kids program?

Being the regional hub partner in the STARS for Kids project has been an incredible opportunity. What began as a simple conversation has grown into something much larger and more impactful than we anticipated.

One of the greatest strengths has been having Sophie, our embedded Research Facilitator, working onsite. This allows us to stay connected to the research while also applying insights almost in real time. Our Centre Leader, Toni, has been actively involved in interviews and the formation of the ACCG, strengthening relationships across both the service sector and the community.

It is a complex project with multiple funding streams and moving parts, but the collaboration between teams has been remarkable. Naturally, challenges arise, but we see them as part of the learning process, and part of the fun of working on something so ambitious.

How are families and staff at FSC engaging in the MRFF or ARC research activities?

Securing Aboriginal Health ethics approval through AH&MRC was a non-negotiable for us and the ACCG. While it delayed the ARC commencement, it was important that the research design respected and included all voices from the outset. As we often say: we didn't want to interview *anyone* until we could interview *everyone*.

So far, Sophie and Toni have conducted 23 service provider interviews, 40% of those with Aboriginal service providers. This has generated invaluable insights about pathways for children and has begun to shape how the hub refines its focus.

The next phase will involve engaging families directly. Many families already know Sophie from her time onsite each week, which we believe will help them feel more comfortable participating in formal interviews.

The MRFF trial has not yet begun in Taree, but the co-design process is well underway. Key stakeholders remain engaged, and their input continues to shape the trial's development and clarify their roles in the research.

What do you see as the biggest opportunities from this research partnership?

One of the most exciting opportunities is the ability to compare and learn from differences across sites. This strengthens the case for place-based approaches, showing how hubs can adapt to local needs while contributing to broader systems change.

The co-design interviews have produced rich data that will be of interest not only to local services but also to funders and future partners focused on improving child and family outcomes.

Looking ahead, we are particularly eager to engage in the Knowledge Translation phase, turning research into practical strategies. This will allow us to think collectively about how local services might adapt to better meet emerging needs, while also contributing to systems-level change that benefits families beyond our own community.

Impact and Vision

Have you seen any early signs of change or impact because of this partnership or the hub model?

Yes. We are already seeing the impact of the child and family hub model at the level of individual families. A consistent theme is the value families place on having a safe, welcoming place where parents can connect socially. Those connections often become the foundation for deeper engagement with supports and services.

Through the STARS for Kids partnership, we are refining our focus and becoming more responsive to the community. A clear theme emerging from interviews is the impact of trauma and intergenerational trauma on family functioning, child development, and

parenting. This is prompting us to reframe our strategic priorities to better address this gap, a critical opportunity for the hub moving forward.

What's your hope for the future of the Hub and for the research?

First Steps Count is here for the long haul. We know that meaningful change in outcomes for children and families, and broader social impact, takes time. It cannot be achieved through short-term funding cycles alone. Our hope is to secure long-term sustainability so we can demonstrate the depth of impact over years to come.

For the hub itself, our vision is that First Steps Count continues to hold fast to its commitment to relational practice and grows as a leader in trauma-informed work. This will enable us to collaborate with services and communities to address trauma, which remains one of the most significant challenges in our region.

Although still young, we only opened in 2023, First Steps Count is already evolving. Our commitment is to remain agile, continually listen to the voice of community, and adapt so we can best support children and families now and into the future.

Thank you, Clare.