

Embrace

2025-2029 research strategy

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Kids Research Institute Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters of Australia. We also acknowledge the Nyoongar Wadjuk, Yawuru, Kariyarra and Kurna Elders, their people and their land upon which The Kids is located and seek their wisdom in our work to improve the health and development of all children.

Embrace acknowledges that our research is only possible with our Indigenous leadership and the involvement of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations in our research design and monitoring. We respect the critical importance of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and values in this project, and we incorporate these through Indigenous Governance, transparent and caring relationships with stakeholders, ongoing consultation with advisory groups, as well as participation from a range of relevant community members. We are committed to meaningful research participation through co-design, culturally safe methodology, and informed consent that places participants as experts in their perspectives and experiences.

Foreword

Professor Helen Milroy Co-Director



Professor Jeneva Ohan Co-Director



Embrace was launched in 2019 with a bold vision: to build a mentally healthy future for every infant, child and young person in Western Australia. Since then, the need for change has only grown more urgent.

Today, we see mental health problems at unacceptably high levels in our children and youth. Global evidence suggests that these rates are still climbing. In the past two years alone, mental health-related overnight hospitalisations among young Australians have risen by nearly 10 percent. The causes are diffuse, with young people growing up in a different social landscape than in previous generations. Still, the beginnings of these challenges are often rooted in unaddressed disadvantage, adversity and trauma in childhood that can have deep and lasting consequences.

Our mental healthcare system must be redesigned. We need to address its current state of overwhelm, and provide more accessible, efficient, culturally safe and empowering care for vulnerable children, young people and families. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in particular, it is vital that care supports cultural connection, healing and belonging. We also need to better recognise and respond to the complex links between childhood trauma and mental ill health, so we can improve diagnosis, healing pathways, and future population health planning.

The 2022 report of the Ministerial Taskforce into Public Mental Health Services for Infants, Children and Adolescents in Western Australia¹ has provided a clear roadmap for reform. Complementing this, the Western Australian Mental Health Research Framework 2024–2028² sets a statewide research agenda that prioritises equity, lived experience, and translation into practice. Embrace is uniquely positioned at the intersection of these two strategies supporting the transformation of services through bold, community-led research and ensuring that evidence is meaningfully applied to drive change.

In 2022, Rio Tinto joined Embrace as our principal partner, strengthening our capacity to pursue bold, community-led mental health research. In 2024, a second round of funding was secured to support our continued growth and impact. This strategic plan sets our direction for the next five years. It outlines how Embrace will continue to partner with young people, families, researchers, clinicians and communities to co-design research that delivers meaningful outcomes and works toward a Western Australia where every child and young person can thrive.

1 - Ministerial Taskforce into Public Mental Health Services for Infants, Children and Adolescents aged 0–18 Years in Western Australia. (2022). Final report – Ministerial Taskforce into public mental health services for infants, children and adolescents aged 0–18 years in WA. Government of Western Australia. <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/awcontent/Web/Documents/ICA%20documents/ica-taskforce-final-report-2022-final-lr.pdf>

2 - Mental Health Commission of Western Australia. (2024). Western Australian Mental Health Research Framework 2024–2028. <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/awcontent/Web/Documents/2015-2024/wa-mental-health-research-framework-2024-28.pdf>



Who we are

Embrace is Western Australia's first research collaboration devoted to the mental health of infants, children and young people ages 0-25.

Based at The Kids Research Institute Australia and Co-Directed by Professor Helen Milroy and Professor Jeneva Ohan, Embrace brings together leading researchers, service providers and community organisations to generate and translate research that reflects the needs, voices and lived experiences of the community.

Since its launch in 2019, Embrace has grown into a nationally recognised collaboration unit that is reshaping how we understand and respond to mental health in early life. Our work provides ground-breaking insight into the impact of trauma, and the need for culturally safe, community-informed support systems. With young people, caregivers and families at the centre of all that we do, Embrace has developed community groups, awarded targeted research grants, and supported a range of initiatives that align with our core research priorities.

To date, we've championed research that matters – supporting projects on medical trauma in chronic illness, exploring the mental health of Australians navigating complex gender affirmation journeys, and funding innovative work across The Kids to address suicide prevention, digital mental health, and cultural healing. We've extended our reach through webinars, panel discussions, community gatherings and our podcast, Embracing the Mind, which platforms researchers, clinicians and people with lived experience across mental health and wellbeing.

In these ways, the importance of community transcends our work. When we talk about mental health, the need for belonging, connection and cultural safety is critical and are the values that continue to shape our strategic direction.

Embrace has hosted a range of initiatives aimed at promoting youth mental health and wellbeing, fostering cultural healing, and amplifying diverse voices in the community. Through these, Embrace has created platforms for dialogue around the pressures facing young people from infancy to adolescence, and celebrated Aboriginal connections to culture, community and country.

This 2025–2029 Strategy reinforces our ongoing commitment to real-world impact, elevating Embrace as a trusted research partner within the Institute and across the wider mental health landscape. Over the next five years, we will continue to collaborate with those most affected by mental health challenges, convert evidence into action, and work towards a future where every infant, child and young person in Western Australia can thrive.




Our vision

A healthier, more inclusive, and thriving Western Australia where children, young people, and families have access to world-leading mental health support, culturally safe services, and innovative recovery pathways.

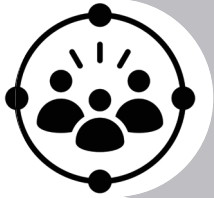
Our purpose

To improve the mental health and wellbeing of infants, children and young people by leading community-driven, clinically focused, trauma-informed, and collaborative research that changes lives, shapes policy and strengthens systems.



Our principles

We are committed to research that is:



Community led

Driven by the voices and priorities of children, young people and families.



Culturally safe

Respecting and upholding Aboriginal leadership, knowledge and sovereignty.



Collaborative

Built on strong, reciprocal partnerships across sectors and communities.



Translational

Grounded in real-world impact and practical change.



Creative & inclusive

Embracing the arts and diverse ways of knowing, being and doing.



Our strategic pillars

Our work is guided by six strategic pillars that define our focus and ambition for the next five years

Elevating lived experience and community voice

We embed the voices of young people, families, and carers in all stages of our work – from research design to dissemination.

Goals

Grow our community groups, develop research advisory groups and host community conversations on research topics

Use creative methods (e.g., Embracing the Mind podcast, storytelling, arts-based projects)

Host a range of initiatives and events to promote mental health in youth and amplify diverse community voices



Championing cultural safety and Aboriginal-led research

We expand Aboriginal-led research and work in partnership with communities to deliver culturally grounded, strengths-based solutions.

Goals

Support Aboriginal researchers and community leaders within and beyond the Institute

Establish an Aboriginal Child Mental Health Research Group

Centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge, and cultural governance across all aspects of our work, guided by Indigenous methodologies such as Aboriginal Participatory Action Research (APAR)



Transforming mental health through research and innovation

We conduct and support community-informed research that addresses trauma, adversity, and complex mental health challenges from early childhood to young adulthood. Research funding and support through Embrace are directed to research teams based within The Kids Research Institute Australia.

Goals

Invest in high-impact research projects led by internal researchers (e.g., Big Idea Grants, PhD scholarship top-ups)

Co-design interventions with families, clinicians and community

Focus on recovery pathways beyond traditional models



Building a trauma-informed workforce

We strengthen internal and external capacity through education and professional development.

Goals

Deliver education and training programs for clinicians, services and community members

Develop culturally safe learning modules and resources

Through the eyes of children and families, understand how health services can be trauma-informed



Driving policy and system reform

We work with policymakers and service providers to embed trauma awareness, recovery support, and research evidence at all levels of healthcare and policy. Our advocacy and research efforts aim to inform systemic reforms that align with state and national priorities.

Goals

Produce actionable reports and toolkits

Hold advocacy roundtables

Align with state and national reform priorities



Sustaining impact through partnerships and investment

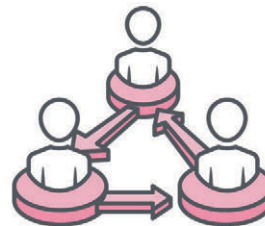
We build long-term sustainability through strong partnerships and diversified funding.

Goals

Leverage internal research funding through grants and philanthropy

Deepen collaborations across sectors

Monitor and evaluate our impact





Our research priorities

Community is at the heart of everything
we do at Embrace



Our research priorities are shaped by the voices of young people, families, carers, and mental health professionals across Western Australia. These priorities were originally developed through a major Embrace-led research priority-setting project¹ and continue to underpin our strategic direction today.

In 2022, we undertook a state-wide consultation involving nearly 700 participants including young people aged 14 to 25 with lived experience, parents and carers of children and young people, and professionals working across the mental health system. Together, they helped identify the most pressing and relevant research questions in infant, child, and youth mental health.

This rigorous process – grounded in community voice – included surveys to gather initial priorities, evidence review to assess gaps, and a final workshop to identify and rank a ‘top 10’ list of research questions. These findings were then analysed alongside stakeholder strategies and researcher input at The Kids Research Institute Australia. From this, Embrace developed three unifying research themes, which were formalised in the Embrace 2022 Research Strategy².

Importantly, the broader findings from this Embrace-led project also informed the development of the Western Australian Mental Health Research Framework 2024–2028³. The Framework explicitly acknowledges Embrace’s contribution as a key input in shaping statewide research priorities, further aligning our community-led approach with the strategic direction of mental health research across Western Australia.

1. Freeman, J., Conroy, R., Brown, G., Rao, P., Padmanabhan, V., McLroy, C., Frank, B., McKenzie, A., Milroy, H., Lin, A., (2022). Identifying the Priorities for Future Infant, Child and Youth Mental Health. Telethon Kids Institute. <https://embrace.thekids.org.au/siteassets/documents/embrace--research-priority-report-1.0.pdf>

2. Embrace @ Telethon Kids Institute. (2022). Our research strategy. <https://embrace.thekids.org.au/about-embrace/>

3. Mental Health Commission of Western Australia. (2024). Western Australian Mental Health Research Framework 2024–2028. <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/awcontent/Web/Documents/2015-2024/wa-mental-health-research-framework-2024-28.pdf>



Our current research priorities are:

Improve access to infant, child, and youth mental health support

We focus on breaking down barriers to both clinical and non-clinical mental health support including care models, peer services, and community-based programs, to ensure all young people can access the support they need, when and where they need it.

Investigate the complex relationships between mental health and other factors

We explore how diverse, interconnected experiences such as trauma, neurodiversity, physical health, identity, and community context, shape mental health and wellbeing across childhood and adolescence.

Support the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people

We prioritise Aboriginal-led, culturally grounded research that strengthens holistic wellbeing and ensures Aboriginal voices, knowledge systems, and governance are central to mental health solutions. In all its activity, Embrace will continue to adhere to the Guidelines for the Standards for the Conduct of Aboriginal Health Research published by The Kids Research Institute Australia, Kulunga Aboriginal Unit.

These priorities ensure that our research is community-led, system-aware, and focused on creating a meaningful, lasting impact.



Measuring impact

Improving the mental health and wellbeing of infants, children, young people, and families requires long-term, collaborative action. At Embrace, we know that our impact is strongest when it's shared and shaped by the knowledge of communities, the strength of partnerships, and the leadership of those with lived and cultural expertise.

We use Healthway's Evaluation Framework¹, which incorporates an evidence-based program logic model that recognises short, medium, and long-term outcomes. This framework helps us clearly map how our work across research, training, partnerships, and advocacy contributes to systemic and sustainable change. It supports us to track not only what we do, but the broader influence of our work across services, communities, and policy.

We monitor a range of indicators, including:

- The number, quality, and clinical/policy impact of funded research projects
- The reach, quality, and feedback from our training and capacity-building programs
- The adoption of research-informed tools and practical solutions in service and policy settings
- The integration of lived experience and Aboriginal governance across our initiatives
- Engagement and participation from young people, families, and communities in our work
- The number of trauma-related and creative research projects initiated
- The involvement of clinical staff in research and uptake of trauma-informed care practices
- Policy changes influenced by our research and advocacy
- New collaborations, researcher retention, and research leadership supported at all career stages
- The level of Aboriginal researcher and community involvement, and culturally grounded research outcomes

Our evaluation approach includes annual reviews (available upon request), independent mid-point and end-of-strategy evaluations, and ongoing feedback loops with community partners and collaborators. Research outcomes are shared through peer-reviewed publications and public-facing reports.

Our partners

Thank you to our principal partner Rio Tinto, Channel 7 Telethon Trust, our host organisation The Kids Research Institute Australia, and our network of mental health researchers, clinicians, Aboriginal community researchers, community members, partner organisations and young leaders across Western Australia.

Get involved

Embrace supports research both inside and outside The Kids and provides an important point of contact and trusted partner for organisations and individuals interested in infant, child, and adolescent mental health research.

If you are interested in the work of Embrace, would like to receive opportunities to take part in and shape mental health research across The Kids Research Institute Australia, and would like to receive invitations to attend Embrace-associated events then we'd love to hear from you!



Email: embrace@thekids.org.au





embrace.thekids.org.au

