

SPIRIT YEAR 2 IMPACT REPORT



SPIRIT:

Supporting Play and Intergenerational Relationships with Indigenous Traditions



CENTER FOR
INDIGENOUS HEALTH



Batchelor
Institute



University
of Otago
OTAKOU WHAKAMU WAKA

Our shared history bears the marks of colonialism's impact. Yet, united in SPIRIT, we draw strength from our diverse cultures, languages, ancestors, and relationships. Together, we build a world of play and reclaim the future for our children.



Letter From the Project Director

Dear Relatives,

As we close out the second year of SPIRIT, I am filled with gratitude and excitement for the remarkable progress we've made together. From our strengths-based, play-centered approach to our unwavering commitment to leading with culture, this year has been about witnessing and celebrating the assets that already live within the communities we serve. Whether we were co-designing vibrant playspaces with local families, meeting caregivers wherever they call home, playing with the land or weaving relationships across oceans and nations, our work has been guided by a simple yet powerful belief: Indigenous traditions, creativity, and play are not add-ons to wellbeing. They are foundational. I want to thank my colleagues, partners, and our funder, the LEGO Foundation, for their commitment to our shared purpose and dreams, abundant, creative energy, and steadfast belief in the power of Indigenous play.

Over the past 12 months, we've collectively reached over 6,200 caregivers and almost 4,800 children and youth around the world with family strengthening services that support families to play.

While the numbers are encouraging, the true success of SPIRIT is in the relationships and transformations we nurture each day. It is in the laughter of a toddler learning a traditional game for the first time, the engagement of a new mother supported, and the inspiration ignited when partners share stories around a fire.

Over the past twelve months, we have hosted a gathering in Mparntwe, and completed visits to lands in Ōtepoti, Brisbane, Skowkale and Lil'wat sites in British Columbia, and on Navajo Nation, engaging with leaders, youth, and practitioners to map our shared values, elevate the role of play in healing, and strengthen collaborative networks that transcend borders. It has been an incredible gift to be welcomed onto the lands of our global partners, to sit together in our visions and challenges, and to discover that none of us is alone in our hopes for our families and communities.

As you explore this annual report, we invite you into our story. Many nations, One SPIRIT!

Qayciyáwyaw (Thank you),

Sophia Taula-Lieras (Umatilla, Cayuse, Walla Walla, Nez Perce, Samoan)
SPIRIT Project Director

Who we are

SPIRIT began with proven wisdom. Family Spirit is an evidence-based home visiting program developed with and for Indigenous families in the United States. Our initial vision was to share these practices across Indigenous communities in four countries: Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, Canada, and the United States. We believed that by adapting Family Spirit's approach to each cultural context, we could support Indigenous families with young children to thrive.



What we discovered was something far more powerful. As Family Spirit took root in diverse Indigenous communities, it didn't simply transplant—it transformed. Māori practitioners in Aotearoa (New Zealand) infused the program with concepts from te ao Māori, creating Kāinga Ako. First Nations communities in Australia wove in on-Country learning and language revitalization. Canadian First Nations centered land-based practices and intergenerational knowledge sharing. Each adaptation strengthened the original root, revealing universal Indigenous truths about child-rearing, cultural connection, and community healing that transcend any single program.

Family Spirit continues to scale and evolve—now reaching more families than ever before and becoming stronger with each cultural stream that enriches it.

Our Community

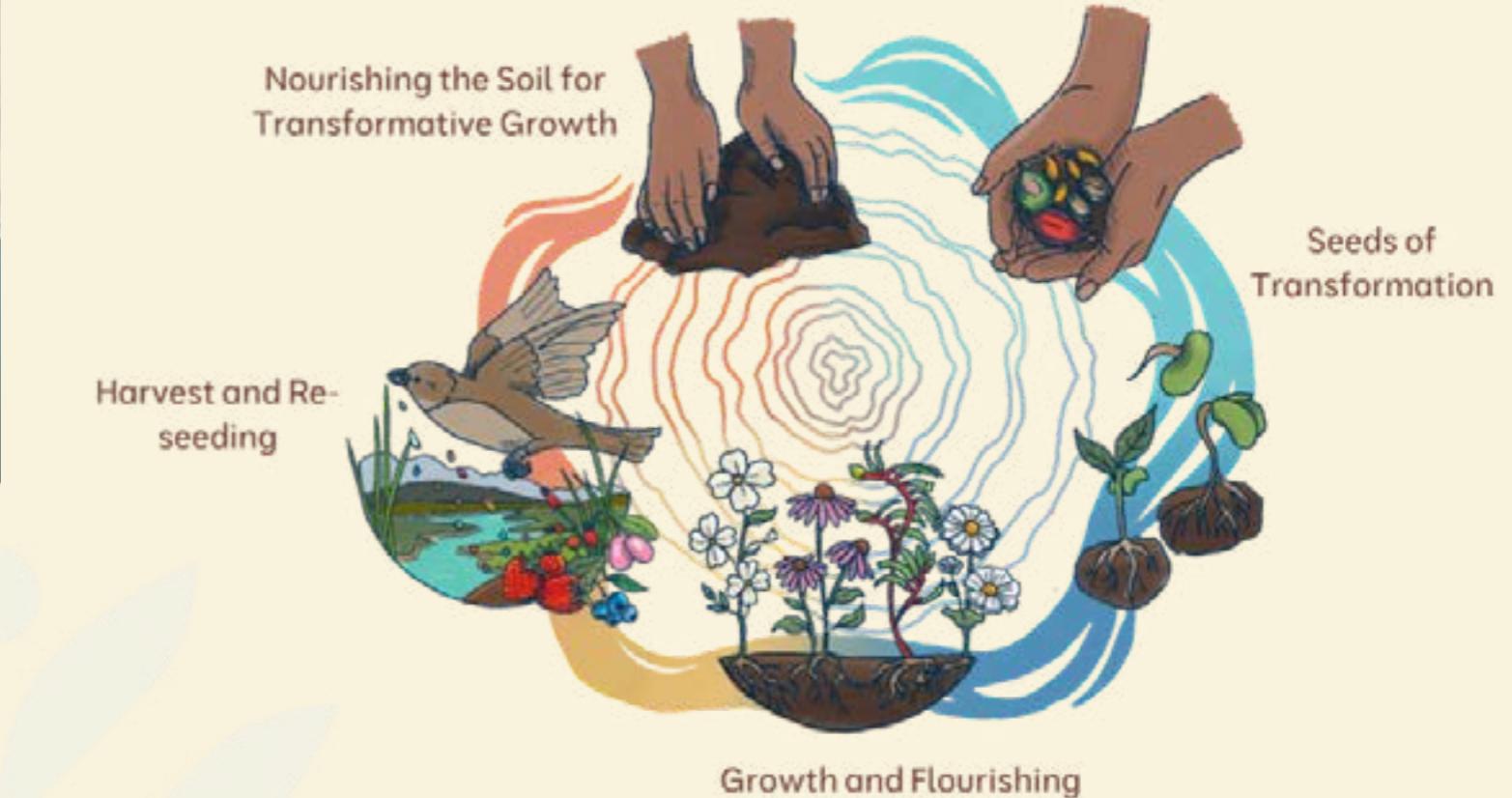
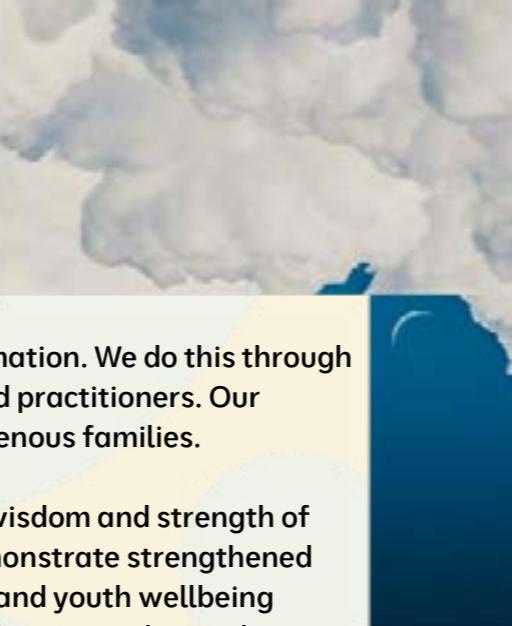


Nourishing the soil

Today, our collective work is to nourish the soil for family transformation. We do this through cultivating the soil, a growing community of Indigenous leaders and practitioners. Our relationships enhance our capacity to serve and advocate for Indigenous families.

The families we serve are like seeds - they carry the potential, the wisdom and strength of many generations. As seeds grow in this enriched soil, families demonstrate strengthened connections to community, culture, land, and traditions. Caregiver and youth wellbeing improves. Children express joy through play, not only in designed playspaces, but in the very landscapes that have shaped their identities. The land itself becomes a place of learning, laughter, and cultural connection. As these relationships deepen, systems begin to reflect the power of Indigenous early childhood and family development.

We see and look forward to the harvest, all the beautiful outcomes we see in the families who are involved in our programming. The harvest in turn creates new seeds – transformed families who influence their communities and nourish future generations.



Embracing Culture, Identity, Language, and Land Through Play



SPIRIT offers programming that links families to cultural traditions, languages, ancestral lands, and the natural world. This type of programming is critical to improving health and wellbeing in Indigenous communities around the world.



Connecting Children to Their Culture Through Play

In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Toi Matarua developed the Kāinga ako framework. In its current format, the framework will organize the Family Spirit Curriculum lessons into a lesson sequence that aligns with Māori knowledge systems to develop caregiving skills in a way that elevates natural tools and resources – linking families to play and place.



Pertame Language Nest, based in Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Australia, holds language sessions to preserve the Pertame language and culture. Children learn to gather and hunt bush foods, make medicines, and understand seasonal cycles. On-Country sessions across programs further nurture these skills through cooking, traditional games, swimming, and identifying plants and animals in Pertame. The program offered almost 100 language nest sessions over the course of 6 months.





In the northern region of British Columbia, a “Family Spirit Café” provides a welcoming space where families in Haida Gwaii connect. Over nutritious snacks and coffees, health educators facilitate a discussion of topics selected by caregivers, including healthy eating, breastfeeding, and children’s learning activities. This casual setting fosters relationships and learning in a supportive, playful, intergenerational environment. Family Spirit activities are complemented by cultural celebrations, such as the Baby Feast that celebrated 24 Haida babies born this year to Old Massett parents. Families introduced each baby, gifting them pieces of regalia, and some babies received their Haida names during the event.



In the US, Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness health educators held sessions outside next to the river, connecting the children to the land and water. They played CDs in the Passamaquoddy language during visits so that the children hear traditional songs while they play.



Strengthening Intergenerational Relationships Through Play

Multigenerational families and communities embody a web of relationships that help Indigenous children and parents thrive. Children learn from the relatives around them like aunties and grandparents. Caregivers are strengthened knowing they raise their children supported by a community that walks alongside them. Elders transfer knowledge and are honored and cherished. And as Indigenous wellbeing strengthens across generations, ancestors dance with joy.



"All our projects are intergenerational and involve old ways of knowledge transmission from the Nannas, Aunties and the babies."

—Dr. Kathryn Gilbey, Batchelor Institute, Australia



Through SPIRIT in Splatsin, British Columbia, one mother is having reconciliation with her child because of the Family Spirit project, drawing from ongoing home visit lessons that emphasize health, well-being, and the parent-child bond. Another mother achieved her goal of launching a thriving Indigenous, female-owned artisanal business, creating and selling ribbon skirts, beadwork, drum bags, and other traditional items, inspired by her Healthy Living plan. The program is enriched as elders get involved who share teachings to preserve and celebrate Splatsin knowledge. This expansion supports new community projects, including parent groups centered on traditional practices like canning, gathering foods and medicines, and land-based teachings, fostering cultural resilience and intergenerational connection.



"SPIRIT...enables us to really focus on the playfulness of our ancestors and reminds us that play is an integral aspect of learning. If parents are too busy to pause to connect and play within our natural environment, then how will our babies and young children learn?"

—Dr. Sally Rye, Toi Matarua, Aotearoa (New Zealand)



Te Hou Ora Whanau Services in Aotearoa (New Zealand) actively includes aunties, uncles, kaumātua (elders), cousins, and older siblings in their programs, recognizing the collective nature of caregiving in te ao Māori (the Māori world view). Groups for caregivers of young children naturally connect with rangatahi (young people) aged 15–24 through Mauri Mahi, Mauri Ora which focuses on building pathways into education, employment, and wellbeing. Many of the māmā (mothers) engaged in Mauri Mahi, Mauri Ora bring their pēpi (babies) with them each week, creating a shared space where rangatahi and tamariki engage in a profound and organic way—most often through play. This spontaneous intergenerational interaction is both healing and empowering. It allows rangatahi to see themselves as nurturers, leaders and protectors, while pēpi respond with trust, joy and playfulness. It has reinforced the understanding that transformation is most powerful when it is relational and grounded in whānau (family) connection. As children make the connection to land and culture in the context of these multigenerational relationships, their sense of identity shifts. They stand a little taller. They ask more questions. They begin to understand who they are and where they come from, not just as individuals, but stretching back generations.



“The Māori word ‘tākaro’ translates as ‘to play’ or ‘to engage’. However, for Māori, the real meaning of tākaro is much broader than this. Tākaro is a vehicle for the transmission of mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). It is the mechanism for creativity and connection, where risks are taken, knowledge is gained, and relationships are formed.”

—Dr. Paula Toko King, University of Otago, Aotearoa (New Zealand)

Building a World of Indigenous Play

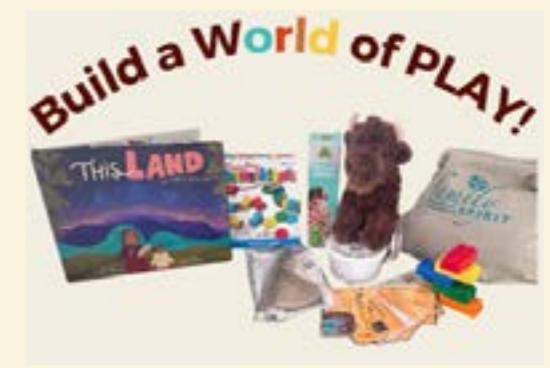
Indigenous play is medicine. Reclaiming play is an act of healing and resistance. For Indigenous children, play in the natural world and with traditional items carries stories, strength, and knowledge across generations. It heals the spirit, nurtures resilience, and empowers children to grow rooted in culture and community. Protecting and honoring their right to play is protecting the future.

In the US, health educators working with the Onkwehon:we Midwives collective in Mohawk Nation give out traditional items, like drums and rattles, to new families. While newborns do not play with the items right away, older children in the family participate in home visits by playing with the drums and rattles.



At least half of home visits done by Coconino County Healthy Families educators incorporate a parent-child interaction activity that focuses on increasing the caregiver's attachment to their baby. Team members tried out the LEGO Six Bricks activities with families and shared that families experienced joy and lots of smiles when doing the activity.

More broadly in the US, the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health team launched a new initiative to spark connection and learning through play with the introduction of PLAYkits. Designed for children ages 0-6, each kit includes engaging, age-appropriate toys like Six Bricks, play dishes, blocks, stuffed animals, rattles, and a Diné string game. Simple guides offer ideas for caregivers to facilitate playful interactions with their children. These kits were thoughtfully designed to reflect the lives and experiences of the families receiving them, blending fun with meaningful early development. The first 100 kits were distributed to sites this year.



"This work and the work of our partners returns the inherent right to play and parenting knowledge to the people where it belongs. It shapes the way we view ourselves and our place in the world, most especially our connection to each other, no matter our origins. This project has provided opportunities to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, travelling to exchange knowledge and bring those enriching experiences home to share for the benefit of our families and community."

—Denise Lacerte, First Nations Health Authority, Canada



In Aotearoa (New Zealand), Tū Kotahi/Kōkiri Marae is building a custom playspace with Māori cultural elements at the center, including a taniwha slide that will wind its way down the hillside beside the marae and sensory elements like plants that children can touch and cultivate.



Linking Children and Families to Essential Services

SPIRIT communities and nations share a history of colonization, erasure, and systemic injustice, whose legacy and ongoing practices undermine mental and physical health, educational attainment, and family wholeness. Environmental and economic threats limit opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. Communities are often remote, isolated, and face compounding challenges such as inadequate plumbing, unreliable internet connectivity, limited access to grocery stores and healthy food options, and significant distances to health facilities and other services. Despite the challenges, Indigenous families and Indigenous-led organizations work together as part of the project to ensure access to healthcare, food and housing, educational opportunities, family reconciliation, and mental health support.



“Through providing essential resources and support to program participants in the Family Spirit program, participants have gained valuable skills and knowledge. The program design is well received by participants, leading to good program engagement.” –

Vicki Shively, Round Valley Indian Health Center, United States

A health educator in the Vancouver Island region works with several families offering culture-centered support and care. One family had been staying at a transition house for moms and babies. With the health educator's support, they successfully moved into second stage housing. The mother had it on her "family plan" to attend the Family Spirit Program. Her file is now closing with Family Services, and she is still very interested in continuing with the Family Spirit program. "I have done so many parenting programs – and I have learned the most from the Family Spirit Program," she said.



Lil'wat health educators gave out gift cards and Good Food Bags to 31 families in a three month period to support nutrition, including vegetables from their community garden. Families in the Vancouver Coast region of British Columbia attend programming more than once a week, enjoying the space, meals, and play activities.



First 2000 Days Program supports families with children aged 0 – 5 years of age from pregnancy until kindergarten in New South Wales, Australia. The program is a local initiative driven by Bundjalung, Gumbaingirr, and Yaegl community Elders and members. They aimed to create a community service organization that would be a safe engagement service delivering cultural safety, empowerment, respect, and openness. Activities create the time and space for families to speak openly about their experiences, their parenting, personal and family needs and desires. A project vehicle takes families to appointments with health, housing, education, or social services and coordinates care and services.



In Australia, Children's Ground partnered with Orange Sky to receive a mobile laundry truck with three washing machines and three clothes dryers capable of handling larger items such as blankets. The truck now operates five days a week, increasing accessibility for many community members to weekly washing almost at their doorstep. This initiative offers free washing and drying services, with a key goal of reducing skin infections. Additionally, the truck creates valuable opportunities for employment and community engagement, enabling conversations about health and learning. Over time, it may also serve as a platform for other services to connect with community members, share information, and improve access to resources. Incorporating play into the timing of the wash trucks centers around healthy home play, where children wash their dolls' clothes and peg them up to dry. Through this play they are learning about looking after others and health practices that will keep their babies healthy and infection free.

Building Strength Together

SPIRIT has forged powerful connections across Indigenous-led organizations serving families of children ages 0-6. This growing network of Indigenous leaders, practitioners, and communities has mapped common approaches to early childhood development, community healing, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

SPIRIT has catalyzed a transformative shift from isolated program delivery to collective action. Dr. Kathryn Gilbey, who leads the SPIRIT work in Australia from Batchelor Institute, traveled to support the national hīkoi marches in Aotearoa (New Zealand) honoring Te Tiriti as an act of cross-national solidarity. Research collaborations between Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health, Te Rōpū Rangahau Hauora a Eru Pōmare at the University of Otago, First Nations Health Authority, and Batchelor Institute have led to co-authored publications, creative outputs including books and podcasts, shared research-to-practice initiatives, and global learning exchanges.



“Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takimano (My strength is not mine alone but the strength of many).” – Māori Whakatauki | Proverb





After the SPIRIT annual gathering in Mpartwe in 2024, the Pertame School in Australia teamed up with Toi Matarua in Aotearoa (New Zealand) to build cultural connections. This collaboration created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Indigenous young people to broaden their horizons, gain new role models and be proud of who they are as First Nations people. As part of this exchange, youth at Toi Matarua wrote heartfelt letters to the babies from the Pertame School, filled with hopes, teachings, and affirmations of strength. These letters offered a powerful gesture of intergenerational care and cultural continuity.



“I love that with this program, and all of the other sites, we have connections all over the world.”

– Alishia West, Nimiipuu Health Clinic, United States

Indigenous professionals working on SPIRIT have been recognized globally for their leadership, innovation and impact. In year 2, Dr. Cheryl Davies (Tū Kotahi/ Kōkiri Marae) was awarded the prestigious Health Research Council of New Zealand's Te Tohu Rauhī Medal for her transformative work in Māori communities. Toi Matarua was nominated for the Te Rangaunua Hiranga Māori Award 2025, given every two years by the Royal Society of New Zealand. The award celebrates innovative, co-created research conducted by Māori professionals that contributes to community wellbeing and development. In Australia, Pertame Language Nest coordinator Sashanna Armstrong won the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week Alice Springs Innovation award. These accolades reflect the strength and brilliance of Indigenous-led efforts across SPIRIT communities.



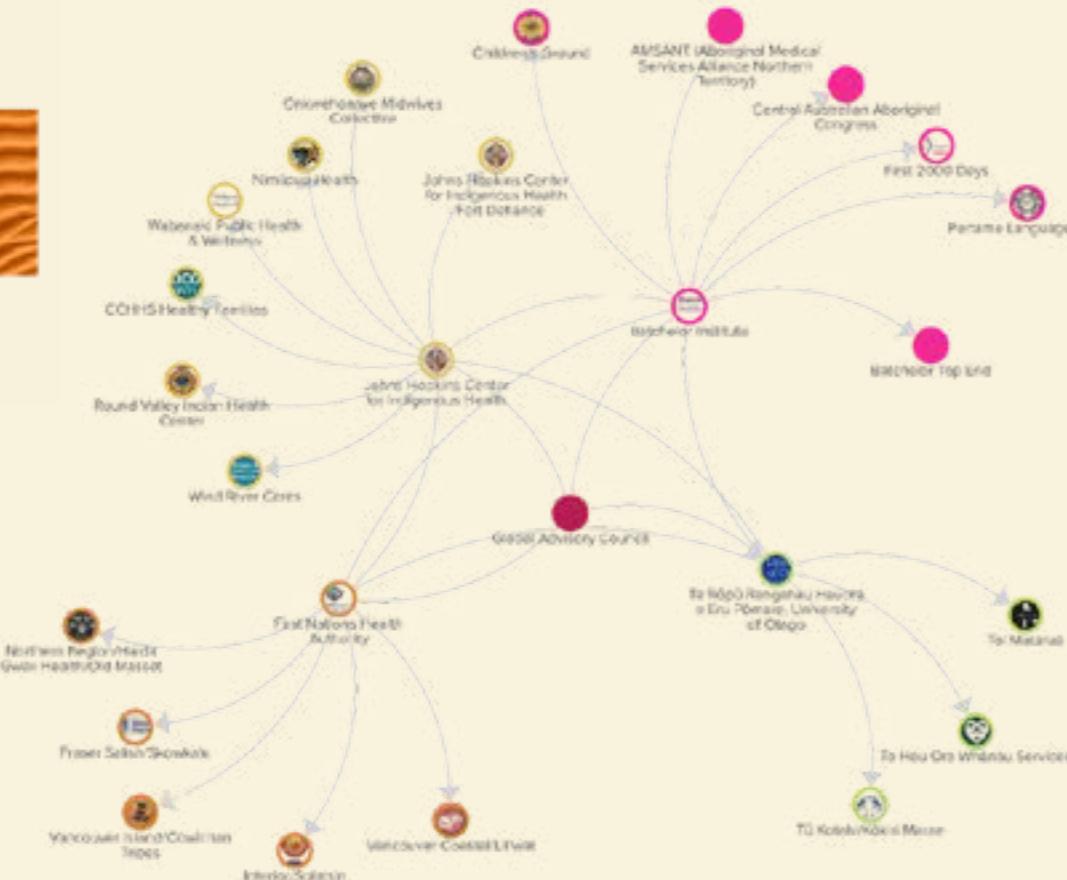
This year the project convened the Global Advisory Council, a group of 12 respected carriers of Indigenous knowledge who add their wisdom and foresight to the movement and create linkages to their global networks. They are champions, providing cultural guidance and deep insight. They use their influence to raise visibility, open doors for investment and transformation, and amplify the narrative of Indigenous-led solutions.



Looking Forward: Deepening Roots, Expanding Reach, Strengthening Impact

As we enter Year 3 of SPIRIT, we see the seeds we've planted together beginning to flourish in ways that will nourish generations to come. The connections forged across continents, the knowledge shared between Indigenous communities, and the cultural practices reclaimed by families are creating momentum that extends far beyond our initial vision.

In the coming year, we will break ground on our flagship playspace in Fort Defiance on Navajo Nation—a space co-designed with community members that will serve as both a model and a gathering place where children connect to land, language, and tradition through play. This playspace represents more than physical infrastructure; it embodies the collective wisdom of Indigenous communities across four countries, bringing together insights about culturally-grounded play from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, Canada, and the United States.



In Year 2, across partners and countries, we reached....



1,572

children 0-6 years old



3,205

children 7-17 years old



6,217

parents & other caregivers



1,246

professionals with training, technical support, and advocacy tools



398

Tribal, Indigenous, or government policymakers and leaders

We substantially grew our service to children and caregivers, reaching 25% of the project's 5-year target for children and youth, and 53% of the project's 5-year target for caregivers.

Reclaiming play as an Indigenous right.

Across our partnerships, we've witnessed how play becomes a vehicle for cultural transmission, healing, and joy. When children engage in traditional games, learn through land-based exploration, or create alongside elders, they aren't just playing—they're learning who they are, where they come from, and how to carry their culture forward. In Year 3, we will deepen our understanding of Indigenous play. Play is not a break from learning or healing—it is the pathway to both.

We are also launching a comprehensive evaluation across our global collective that centers Indigenous definitions of family wellbeing and child thriving. This evaluation will capture not just whether children play, but how culturally-grounded play shapes their identity, strengthens family bonds, and reconnects communities to ancestral knowledge. Rather than imposing Western measures of success, we will document and honor how each community understands transformation—from cultural reconnection to intergenerational healing to community-driven systems change. This evaluation will be led by Indigenous researchers and grounded in methodologies that respect data sovereignty and community ownership.

Our goal is to reach 8,000 more children and families in Year 3, expanding programming in existing sites while deepening the cultural grounding of our work. We will support partners in developing additional land-based play experiences, strengthen pathways for elders and traditional knowledge holders to share traditional games and play practices, and continue building the global network of Indigenous early childhood practitioners who are reimagining what it means to raise healthy, culturally-connected children.

The global SPIRIT initiative strives to reclaim our languages, philosophies, and ways of being to restore intergenerational well-being for Indigenous Peoples and our planet. We envision a future in which all children are born into a world that knows them, sees them, and embraces them. A world where they thrive in spaces that honor their joy, their potential, and their brilliance; grounded in identity, language, land and ancestral knowing. A world in which caregivers are supported to nurture their children in safe, beautiful communities. The health of the planet will benefit from the success of this movement.



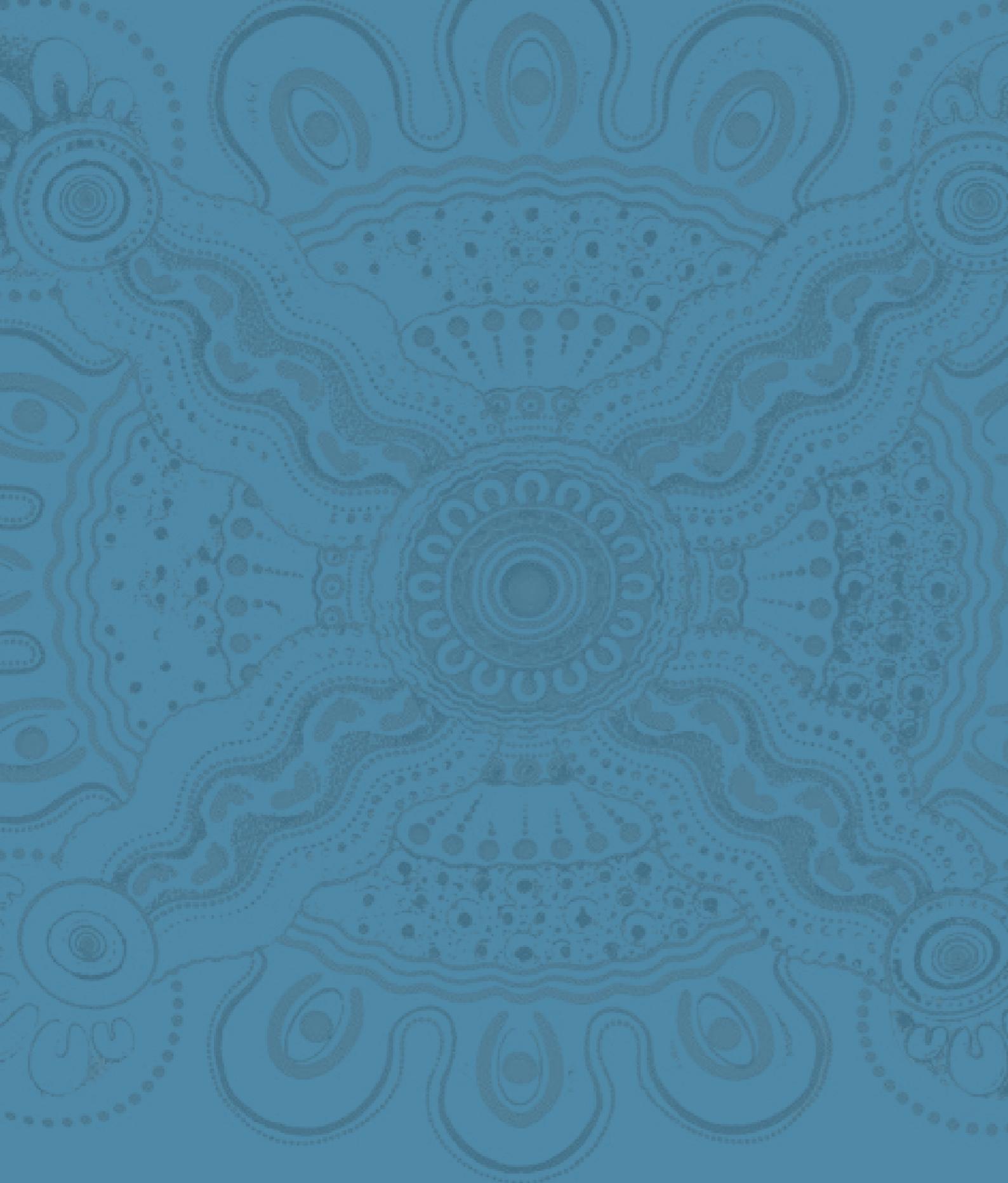
Together, we continue to build a world where Indigenous children play, learn, and flourish rooted in the strength of their ancestors and the promise of their future.



With deep gratitude, we acknowledge our funder,

The LEGO Foundation

From our hearts, we thank our community partners, the families we serve alongside, and the lands where we live, work, and play.



SPIRIT:

Supporting Play and Intergenerational Relationships with Indigenous Traditions