



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

The Early Start Discovery Space member study: Where are they now?

PARTICIPANT REPORT
MAY 2026

Early Start brings families, educators, and our communities together to help children learn, grow, and thrive.

Thank you to the 630 families who took part in this study. Your time, stories, and reflections help us understand how the Discovery Space supports children, families, and the community.

This report presents an overview of what we did in the study and what we learned from the participating families.

If you'd like more information, please contact earlystart-rp@uow.edu.au.

This study was conducted by researchers in the Early Start Research Institute at the University of Wollongong to coincide with Early Start's 10th Birthday.

Investigators: Prof. Lisa Kervin AM, Prof. Lisa Smithers, Prof. Steven Howard, Dr. Crystal Arnold, Dr. Gina Hawkes, Prof. Bridget Kelly, Lisa Kilgariff, Dr. Franca Mackie, Dr. Matthew Schweickle, Dr. Chye Toole- Anstey, Dr. Joanna Waloszek and Dr. Lauren Weber.

On the lands that we study, we work, and we live, we acknowledge and respect the traditional custodians and cultural knowledge holders of these lands.



What did we do?

The Early Start Discovery Space member study invited families to reflect on their experiences at the Discovery Space to help us understand how things have changed over time. A decade after opening, we reconnected with our previous members to find out where their children are now. Their stories, memories, and insights helped us understand the part that the Discovery Space has played in their child's journey.

What did we want to learn?

We wanted to know what it's like for a child to grow up visiting the Discovery Space regularly.

By hearing insights and experiences, we wanted to learn how the Discovery Space has supported and impacted children, families, and their communities over time.

Who took part?

We invited families who were Discovery Space members between 2019 and 2023.



630

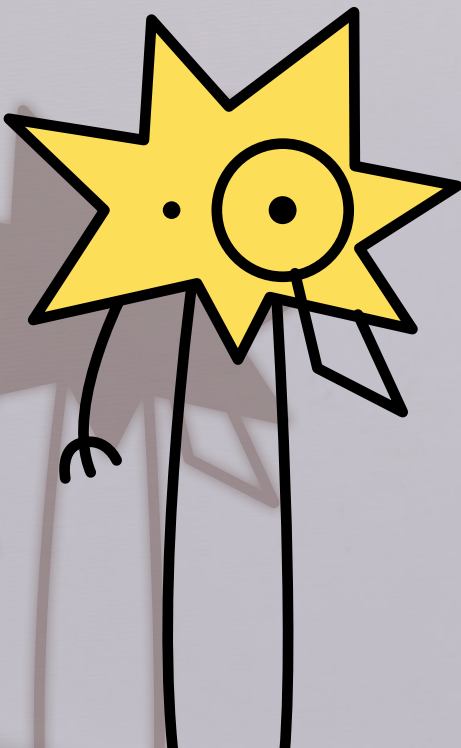
families completed an online survey about their child's experiences as a member and how they are now.



40

families joined online focus group discussions to share stories and perspectives about their child's engagement with the Discovery Space.

The children whose parents participated were aged 2-18 years old when their parent completed the survey, with an average age of 7 years.



We wondered about



Membership visits



Favourite experiences



Experiences of school and learning



Community connections



Friendships



Social and emotional development

What we learned

Most families were members for at least 2 years. Over 50 families were members for 5+ years.

Families visited an average of 12 times over their membership, some came once and others returned more than 160 times.

Families reported their children are doing well overall in their development and early learning

- Around nine in ten children were reported by families as being on track or showing strengths in fine motor skills (89%) and gross motor skills (89%).
- Most children were described as being on track or showing strengths in creating and sustaining friendships (82%) and social-emotional development (72%).
- Among the 67% of surveyed children who have started school, the majority reported enjoying school activities (85%) and look forward to school a lot (75%).



Survey responses suggest that long-term Discovery Space membership offers meaningful benefits over time

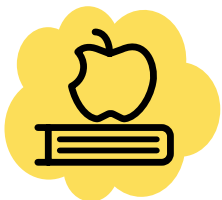
Survey results found that each additional year of membership was linked with parents reporting that their child experienced:



Better peer acceptance



Fewer friendship challenges



Less school avoidance



Fewer behavioural difficulties

The Discovery Space is a gathering place where people feel they belong.

Families told us that the Discovery Space is more than just a fun outing - it is a place where children and their families feel welcome and safe to explore, create, and learn through play.

Many parents described feeling relaxed and connected when visiting.

Parents explained that the space encouraged them to slow down, follow their child's lead, and enjoy open-ended play together.

The Discovery Space is...

“A nice space to go with friends or family... a great space to share with other people that have children like you in your life.”

“A place where I could take them and sometimes meet friends and their children... where they could explore imaginary play.”



The Discovery Space supports confidence and social learning

Families shared that their children's confidence and peer interactions were nurtured within the Discovery Space. Many children became more comfortable interacting with peers over time.

Families also valued having unstructured, child-led exploration.

"It gave him a lot more confidence around older kids... it really helped boost his confidence."

"He was reluctant to talk or share at first. But slowly he realised... how do we share, how do we talk, how do we approach other kids?"

"I really loved the open-ended play... having no plan for a few hours and seeing what things interest them."

Survey responses and focus-group discussions showed that children's play and engagement evolved throughout their membership.

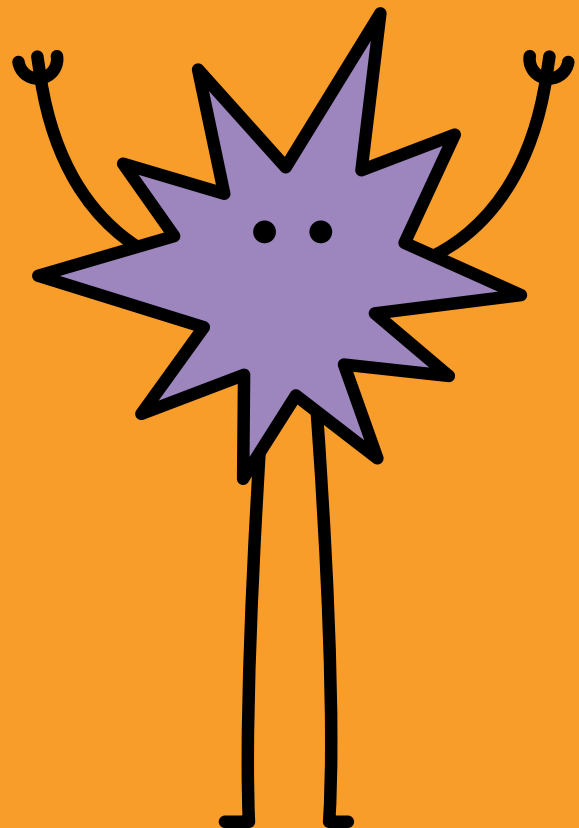
Parents noticed that as their children grew older, their interaction with experiences changed, and became more detailed and purposeful:

"When she was very little in the kitchen, she was just putting things in a bowl. When she got older, she'd say, 'Sit down mummy, I'll take your order' ...and bring the meal back."

"The pizza station was just messing around when he was younger, but now he takes an order and makes something specific. These activities have such longevity."

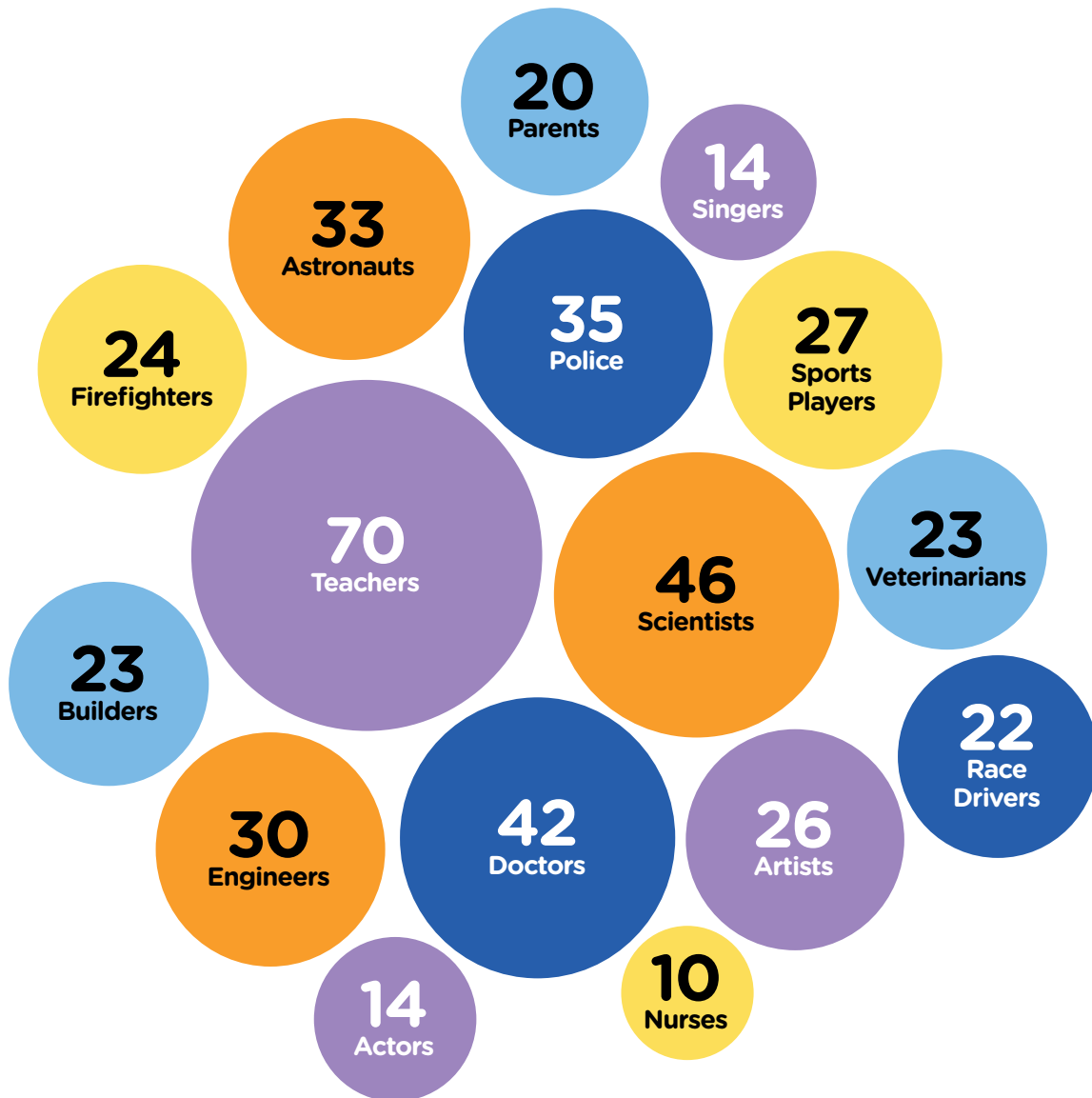
Families valued that the Discovery Space experiences seemed to adjust and cater to their children's changing interests and developmental needs.

"The whole experience was wonderful, my kids still talk about it now and remember it fondly."



Future Aspirations of Member Children

When asked “what does your child want to be when they grow up?”, parents reported a wide range of ambitions including...



Some also embraced multiple career paths...

“A koala doctor, who also plays tennis and has a YouTube Channel.”

“A monster truck driver and a policeman on the weekend.”

“A city councillor, musician and vet.”

“A game app developer, CEO engineer and later in life a Uber driver.”

and disposition...

“Happy.”

The Top Five Rated Discovery Space Experiences



1

Discovery Garden

"My son always ventured to the outdoor space... he really loved water and being able to climb into the water and be able to play in a very safe environment."



2

Marketplace

"...it was very interactive, not only with me but other kids. An easy way to bond with your children."



3

Construction Zone

"...she'd never been exposed to anything like that anywhere else, and it was like, oh, wow, like, my dad does that, or I see that being done outside of this space and I can do that."



4

Trains

"...as soon as he went through those gates, he would bolt to the trains and stay there for about an hour."



5

Critter Cafe

"She also loved being in the kitchen and serving me in the cafe, making me pizza, making me burgers."

What's next?

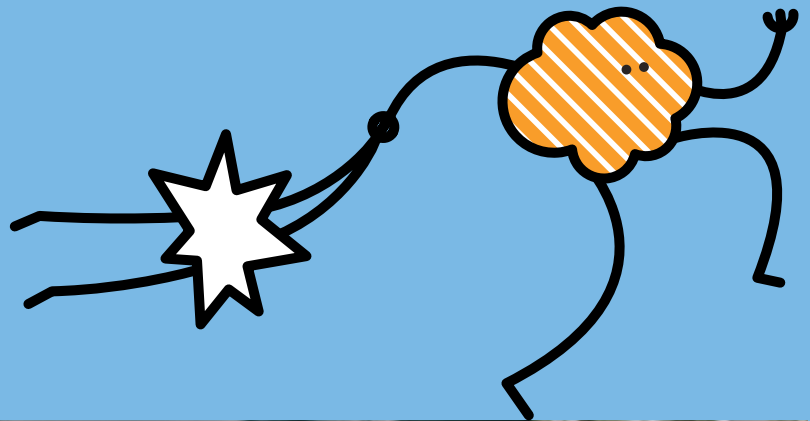
These reflections, responses, and stories from families will help guide the Early Start team in how we continue to design the space and programs, support children and their adults, and plan for the future.

We will use what families have shared to:

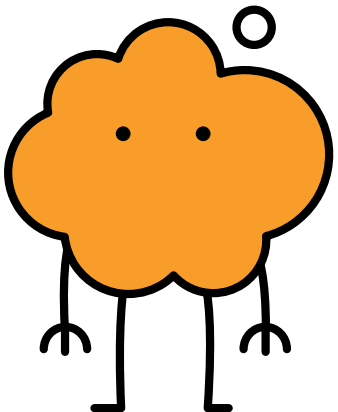
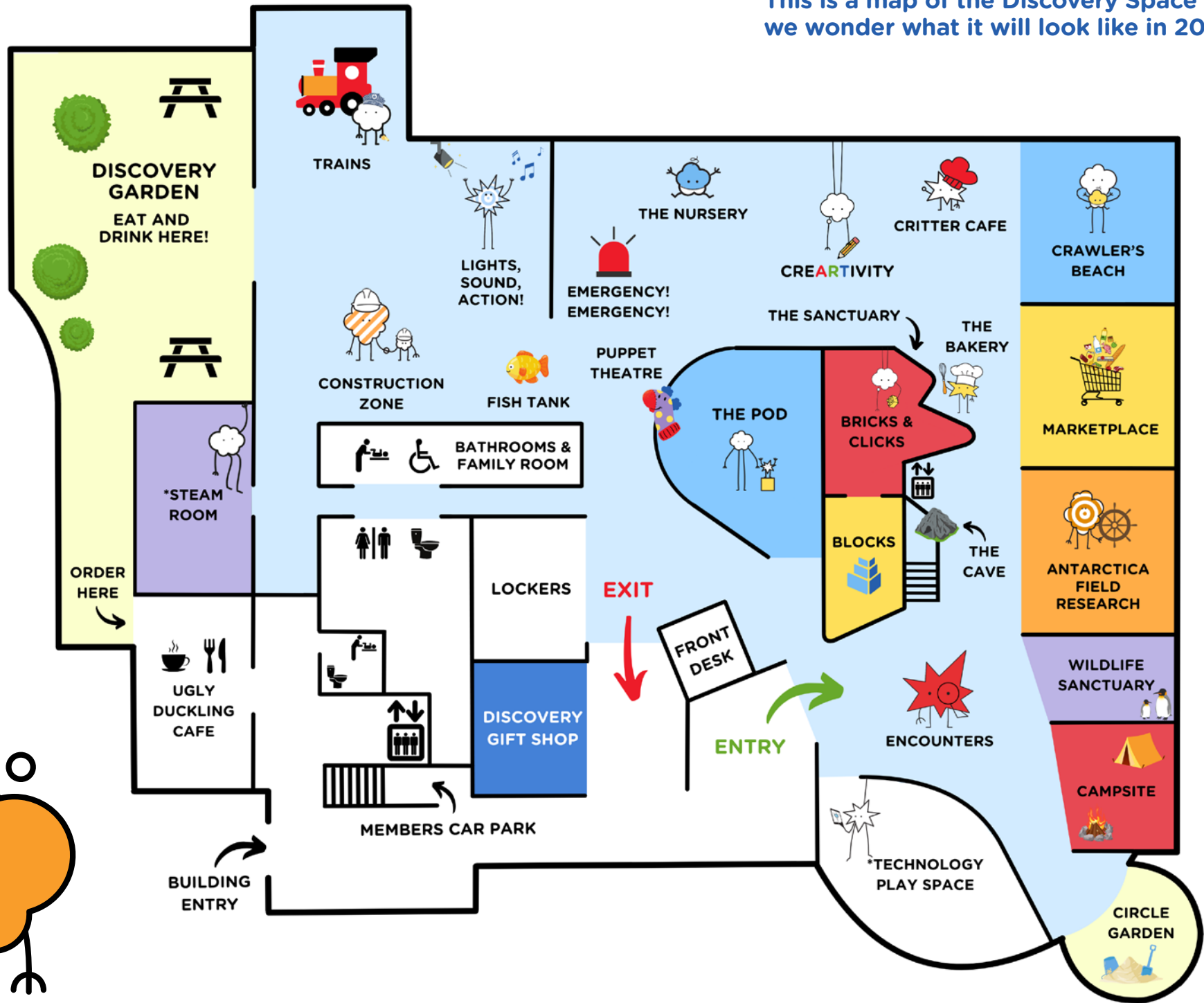
- Keep in touch with our members and their experiences.
- Better understand how the Discovery Space supports children, their adults, and community.
- Continue creating engaging resources for our members.

We understand that this report shares a snapshot from families at a particular moment in time who chose to participate. We acknowledge that every family's experience is different, and what is shared may not be the experiences of every family, but these findings help us learn and plan for the future.

Thank you for contributing to this study. At Early Start, we value partnerships with children and their adults (including families, educators, and other community members) where we work together as co-learners and creators for positive childhoods.



This is a map of the Discovery Space in 2026, we wonder what it will look like in 2036.





UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Contact us:

Email: earlystart@uow.edu.au

Website: earlystartdiscoveryspace.edu.au