ACD

Snapshot: Experiences of families in early childhood education

October 2025

Background

ACD is the Victorian advocacy service for children with disability and their families. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by, and for, families of children with disability.

Our vision is an inclusive community where children with disability and their families thrive.

In August 2025, ACD ran a *Have Your Say* consultation on child care and kindergarten. The session captured the perspectives of families of children with disability, focusing on what helps them feel welcome and build positive partnerships with early learning teachers and staff, what adjustments and practices support their child's learning and participation, and their experiences with inclusion funding.

Participants included families with children currently enrolled in early learning settings, as well as those whose children had recently graduated. This covered both kindergarten and child care settings.

The findings from this consultation provide timely and important insights, particularly with major reforms underway at both the Commonwealth and Victorian Government levels to strengthen children's access to quality early childhood education.

For more information contact

Karen Dimmock CEO

karend@acd.org.au

0448 912 786

Executive summary

ACD ran a *Have Your Say* consultation session with families on child care and kindergarten. The consultation explored families' experiences in early learning settings, including what works well, what isn't working, and what they would like to see done differently to better support the inclusion, learning, and participation of their child and other children with disability.

Families consistently highlighted the value of staff who took the time to get to know them and their child, offered flexibility, and collaborated with allied health professionals. These practices built trust and created welcoming environments for families. Practical accommodations, such as providing space for telehealth appointments that allowed children to remain engaged in learning or allowing a parent to stay while the child transitioned into the day, were valued by families.

Openness, curiosity, and consistent communication were recognised as important foundations for positive partnerships and collaboration. Families stressed the importance of both informal conversations and formal meetings and wished to see more of the structured processes available in the school system introduced into early learning, such as Individual Education Plans.

Parents described a range of adjustments that supported their child's learning and participation, including adapted activities, increased supervision, varied communication methods, and physical changes to classrooms. They valued staff who were responsive and willing to upskill but noted that many of these changes were driven by families rather than embedded as routine practice. Families called for greater investment in staff training and a stronger understanding of disability across the workforce, to ensure positive attitudes and inclusive practices.

Experiences with inclusion funding in both child care and kindergarten were mixed. While some families accessed additional support, others were deemed ineligible. The application process was often described as confusing and burdensome, requiring parents to present their child "at their worst." Criteria were seen as narrowly focused on behaviours of concern rather than taking a holistic view of inclusion needs. Staff knowledge and initiative were critical to successful applications, but a lack of expertise within some centres created barriers. Even where funding was approved, approval delays, workforce shortages, and the lack of focus on child-specific needs limited its impact.

1. Building positive partnerships and welcoming environments

Feeling welcome and working collaboratively

Families in the consultation consistently highlighted the importance of early childhood centres fostering welcoming environments. When teachers and centre staff took the time to meet with families, learn about their child, and provide opportunities for ongoing interaction, families felt heard and included.

Parents value when staff demonstrate a genuine commitment to inclusive practice and a willingness to work collaboratively to develop practical solutions that best support the child.

"I guess they just listened to me and, you know, would spend time talking with me at drop-off and pick-up."

"Whenever they were open to just listening and trying to brainstorm together, I think that was when I felt the most comfortable."

Positive experiences were also reported when centres responded supportively to family concerns and transitions.

"We started with [a different] kinder … [and had] a lot of issues. Then we decided to move to a different kinder. … [W]hen we told them the reason why we moved in the middle of the year, they did not treat us as a troublemaker."

When asked what supports a good partnership between families and early childhood educators, participants emphasised the importance of openness and ongoing communication.

"Being curious about our perspective/knowledge."

"Clear and open communication helps a lot."

A gap in formal partnership and planning processes

Families saw these partnerships as being fostered through both informal interactions and formal meetings and expressed a desire for stronger structures to support discussion and planning, similar to those in the school system.

One parent noted that they would have valued more time to prepare and collaborate with the centre prior to the start of term.

"We were told the [individual education plan] doesn't 'exist' in kindergarten level but is only available in school level, but if there is something similar in kindergarten age would be good."

"More [information] before the start of the year. I could not speak to anyone until after the school holidays and the week before the start of the term."

2. Adjustments and inclusive learning

Inclusive practices and adjustments

"… [I]nclusion to us looked like [our child] being able to do the same activity, just slightly modified so she doesn't miss out."

When asked what practical strategies or adjustments had been put in place to support their child's learning and participation, families identified several examples, including:

- Increased supervision
- Implementation of strategies recommended by allied health professionals
- Support for varied communication methods
- Adaptation of activities to promote inclusion
- Flexibility with early or late drop-off and pick-up
- Physical changes to the classroom to improve accessibility

"Extra support/supervision at lunchtime to make sure she ate some food."

"We've had our therapists come to 3-year-old kinder and [centre staff have] really been on board. … [T]hey've taken all of [the feedback from therapists] constructively, and, you know, put that all in place."

"They did some keyword sign training, because when my son first went, he was non-verbal. That took a little while to get underway … but that made a huge difference."

One parent observed that many of the changes were initiated by families after enrolment, rather than being embedded practices within the centre.

Need for greater professional training, disability awareness and accessibility

Families were asked what additional adjustments would better support their child's learning. They emphasised the need for teachers and staff to be better supported, with greater access to training and professional development.

Families also expressed a desire for early childhood education and care staff to have a stronger understanding of disability, to foster more positive attitudes and inclusive practices toward children with disability.

"Teachers who are trained in managing and engaging kids with different needs."

"Not mistaking emotional dysregulation for poor behaviour and therefore choosing isolation strategies."

Parents highlighted that smaller class ratios, improved classroom layouts, and alternative teaching methods would foster children's learning and inclusion.

"Purpose-built spaces for sensory accommodations, smaller group sizes for those who need it."

One parent, reflecting after their child had moved into the school system, noted that early childhood education could learn from the structures and supports available in schools.

"My daughter's school has a dedicated Disability Inclusion Coordinator who supports staff to be inclusive and makes sure funding and adjustments are in place - something like that in kinder would be great."

3. Inclusion funding

Navigating the application process and program awareness

Participants were asked about their experiences applying for and using inclusion funding, including Inclusion Support Program and Kindergarten Inclusion Support. Experiences were mixed: some families accessed funded supports, while others applied but were deemed ineligible.

When discussing the application process, parents frequently described it as confusing and difficult to navigate.

"Information regarding the inclusion funding should be made more clear and accessible to families and centres, as if they are eligible for it, the process should be made simpler for families whose lives are already very complex, and for centres who already manage a lot of complex tasks on a daily basis."

Families also reported that applications often required them to describe their child "at their worst", with some noting that the funding criteria had a narrow focus on safety-related behaviours of concern rather than taking a more holistic view of inclusion needs.

"[The centre] did apply for [inclusion support funding] when she went to 4-year-old kinder, but because she didn't have any dangerous behaviours to herself or to other children, she really didn't tick any of the criteria. … [S]he really needed it for the social aspects, and engaging in the learning and engaging in the play, but she didn't get the funding because she didn't fit the criteria, and that was really, really disappointing."

Parents also discussed how the centre's familiarity with funding processes and applications supported both families and outcomes. One parent noted that she had not been aware of the inclusion program, and that it was the staff who initiated the process and helped her prepare the documentation and complete the application.

"The staff were really supportive [in helping our family apply for inclusion funding]. We had a meeting with four of their key staff members, including, the kindergarten teacher, the director, the assistant director, and the staff member that knew our son very well. … If none of those people had that experience, I guess our outcome could have been so, so different."

In contrast, many families described the lack of knowledge within their centres about inclusion funding as a barrier.

"The teachers not knowing how to apply for it was the first big hurdle we had."

"We've tried [to access inclusion supports], but the kinder didn't know what to do with it! They didn't know how to apply."

Implementation challenges

For families whose children accessed inclusion funding, several impracticalities of the process were highlighted. These included the need to reapply each year, the requirement for the child to commence enrolment before an application could be lodged, and lengthy delays between submission and approval. In some cases, this meant children did not receive supports until well into the year. Parents expressed a strong preference for being able to start the process earlier, to ensure support was in place from the beginning of their child's education.

"We were not able to get the funding until nearly mid of term two."

"[You have to] wait until the year begins before starting application when enrolment from prior year was confirmed in September/October."

Workforce shortages were also identified as a challenge for many centres, making it difficult to secure additional staff even when inclusion support funding was available.

While parents acknowledged that access to inclusion support had a positive impact on their child's participation, they felt it lacked a child-specific focus.

"[The funding provided] an additional staff member in the room when he was at child care, which did help, I guess, to a degree, but it wasn't specific to his needs, which was a bit frustrating."

Families who participated

Eight families participated in the consultation. Ther children ranged in age from four to eight years, with an average age of six. The primary disability of participants' children included: autism, global developmental delay, genetic/chromosomal, Deaf/hard of hearing, and one awaiting diagnosis.

Six participants identified as female, and three as culturally and linguistically diverse. All the families were from urban areas.

One family who could not attend the session provided written feedback. The feedback included collated quotes from other families in their community.