Submission to Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability's inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative

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Introduction

About the Child and Family Disability Alliance

The Child and Family Disability Alliance (CAFDA) is a national partnership of not-for profit family-led organisations: ACD, Kiind and Belongside Families.

Together, we support more than 30,000 families and carers raising children with all kinds of disability and developmental delay across Australia.

Our shared vision is to empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge, skills and connections they need so their families and children can thrive.

We work by building the capacity and wellbeing of parents and carers through our well established and proven model providing information, skills building and peer support.

CAFDA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability's inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative.

Family voice

In recent years, CAFDA has undertaken extensive consultation with 600+ families (see Appendix A) to better understand their experiences of early childhood support services and systems, and the improvements they would like to see for children with disability and their families.

This submission draws directly on that work, grounded in the insights and lived experience of hundreds of families in the CAFDA community.

Recommendations

1. Thriving Kids should embed a dedicated program of Lead Practitioner support as a core element of its design, recognising that children's developmental outcomes are shaped first and foremost in the context of their home and family life.

Key features of Lead Practitioner support should include:

- Delivery in children's everyday environments, particularly the home
- Coaching-based approaches that strengthen parental skills, confidence and self-efficacy to support their child's development
- Provision of regular sessions, with support available beyond one year for families who require ongoing assistance

2. Design and fund Thriving Kids so that all services are delivered in line with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention, with compliance requirements embedded in commissioning contracts and routine reporting.

3. Establish a standardised pathway that creates routine touchpoints and safeguards so children with higher, complex or emerging needs are identified early, referred to more intensive supports, and connected to the NDIS when appropriate.

An ecosystem of supports that meets the needs of children and their families

1. Effectiveness of current initiatives and implementing best practice

What families want

Supported families, supported children – Lead Practitioner support for families

Children cannot be understood or supported in isolation from their family. Fostering the wellbeing and capacity of the entire family, including siblings, is essential to achieving positive outcomes for the child.

> *"The health and wellbeing of the child and the entire family can be impacted when children have delays/disabilities, so early supports to assist are so important in maintaining family units and reducing stress, as well as skill development."*

Families highlight the need for true family-centred practice, where practitioners:

- Work in partnership with families to understand their circumstances, challenges, strengths, and cultural needs
- Build families' skills, confidence, and capabilities
- Provide personalised, responsive strategies that nurture the child's development within the context of family life and environment

> *"Our daughter's [Lead Practitioner] empowers us to incorporate 'therapy' into everyday activities. Each session can swap from daughter's goals to helping a parent cope with issues and incorporates actions for both parents to take between sessions."1*

> *"In this early age group, a lot of it is about us as parents - building our understanding of our children, their neurology, what their needs are,*

[1] Quotes throughout this submission are taken from CAFDA's consultation work with families (see Appendix A), unless stated otherwise

their sensory profile, all those sorts of things that make a difference to how we work as a family."

While delivering supports in mainstream and community settings contributes positively to children's development and strengthens professional capacity, children spend most of their time at home with their families. It is within this context that they practice and maintain new skills and build competencies.

As the National Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention highlight:

"As children learn in the context of their families, families are the primary influence on children's learning and development."[2]

Thriving Kids should adopt a holistic approach that supports both the child and their family. This requires a dedicated program of support for parents and carers, delivered by Lead Practitioners. Key features of this support should include:

- Delivery in children's everyday environments, particularly the home
- Coaching-based approaches that strengthen parental skills, confidence and self-efficacy to support their child's development
- Regular sessions, with support available beyond one year for families who require ongoing assistance

There are a range of positive programs already underway that support the identification of family-centred goals and needs, and equip families with the knowledge, skills and confidence to nurture their child's development. These programs also strengthen family wellbeing, foster positive parent–child relationships and attachment, and connect families with the services they need. They provide valuable models that can inform a national approach.

Examples include:

- Brotherhood of St Laurence's Enhanced Early Supports pilot program (Victoria)
- Western Australia's Child Development Service

[2] Early Childhood Intervention Australia. (2016). *National Guidelines: Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention*. Available at ECIA National Guidelines: Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention | Department of Social Services

Support to enable community and education participation and inclusion

Families want supports to help children with disability to fully participate in community life. This means setting personalised goals and strategies for each child, while also building the capacity of mainstream and community settings to be more inclusive, understanding, and adaptable to diverse needs.

> *"I'd like to experience more peace of mind knowing my son is thriving and that the supports are making a positive impact."*

Families identify their key hopes and markers of success as:

- Greater independence for their child
- Stronger relationships with peers, family, and the broader community
- Active participation in education and community
- A stronger sense of inclusion and support for the whole family

They believe that everyday environments, such as kindergarten, school, home, and community settings, should be the default settings for delivering supports. These real-life contexts provide the best opportunities for skill-building and help children work towards positive outcomes in education and community participation.

> *"School visits are vitally important for keeping therapy goals relevant and accurate as my daughter presents very differently at school versus in the clinic."*

> *"Understanding the child outside of the therapy room, their strengths and growth areas. Understanding that capacity differs from home to therapy room where it is a controlled environment."*

> *"My child has high support needs and struggles immensely in unfamiliar environments. Simply getting to a clinic often triggers meltdowns or exhaustion, and by the time we arrive, my child is too dysregulated to benefit from the session. Having therapists come to our home means they can work with my child in a safe, familiar space [and] where the real challenges happen. It also allows me to be involved, which makes a huge difference in supporting my child between sessions."*

Embed supports in education settings

Year after year, education remains the top concern for the families CAFDA works with. Families want their children to experience the social, learning, and developmental benefits of full inclusion in education, and they see better coordination between allied health supports and early learning environments as key to achieving this.

Families want better collaboration between their child's allied health therapists and educators to ensure everyone is on the same page, create more consistency for children, develop shared strategies, and coordinate goals.

Greater collaboration between allied health professionals and educators is also seen as essential for building positive relationships with families. When these partnerships are strong, families are supported rather than left to carry the burden of advocating and educating for inclusion on their own.

> *"I'd like to see allied health talk to educators about how to support children's learning in routines that are based on what their daily routines are in their long daycare or kinder or school environments. I would like to see them also be part of a relationship where educators can ring them and say, 'Hey, what do you think about this?', or they could be part of sitting in on team meetings or planning."*

> *"Reduce burden on families to provide schools/teachers with information and reports to access funding."*

An example for the Committee's consideration of supports embedded in education settings is Child and Family Hubs. These hubs, located in early learning and school settings, promote integrated service system support for children and families, enable joint planning and information sharing among professionals working with the family, and provide a welcoming, local environment where families can connect with peers.

Navigating a complex system with inconsistent quality

Families have shared that one of the biggest challenges in accessing NDIS-funded early childhood intervention supports in finding services. It is stressful, time-intensive and costly to navigate the service system and understand what support will best nurture their child's development.

Families want best practice support to be the norm, ensuring that all families – regardless of postcode, income or market savviness – have access to high-quality and consistent supports.

> *"It shouldn't be so hard and time consuming to get reliable and practical information and to find services that can help."*

> *"Accessing therapy takes a lot of resources from parents and child - and it's got a cost in terms of what the child doesn't get to do with that time - so it needs to be worthwhile."*

Ensure alignment with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention

While the introduction of the NDIS has delivered vital supports for children with disability and their families, it has also created new challenges. The NDIS Review highlighted a lack of focus on shaping the early intervention market and limited requirements or incentives for providers to deliver best practice supports. The current reform offers a valuable opportunity to reset the system and ensure all children can access high-quality, evidence-based supports during this critical stage of development.

The Australian Government has invested the development of the recently released National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. Led by the University of Melbourne, a consortium of partners undertook extensive consultation and literature review to inform this work.

To ensure these reforms and investments lead to consistent access to best practice approaches and improved outcomes for children, the design of Thriving Kids must align with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. This should be supported through professional registration and accreditation processes, commissioning approaches that require best practice capabilities, investment in professional development, and the establishment of an outcomes framework with ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

> *"The 'wrong' therapy is at best costly, but [at worst] can be traumatising and regressive."*

2. Identifying and supporting developmental delay

Recognising the crucial role of the early childhood workforce

For many families, disability or developmental delay is first identified by professionals who work closely with children, such as maternal and child health nurses or early childhood educators. These professionals carry the responsibility of holding nuanced and often difficult conversations with families. Importantly, such critical conversations cannot be replaced by the provision of information alone.

The Thriving Kids program should recognise the central role this workforce plays and ensure they are equipped with the right supports and training, both to identify developmental delay or concern and to provide appropriate advice and guidance to families in a sensitive manner.

Children with high support needs

For children with high and complex support needs, who require access to a broader range of multidisciplinary supports beyond what Thriving Kids can provide, robust screening processes are essential. These processes must ensure that children are promptly identified, referred to, and able to access the NDIS.

It is also important to recognise that, in the early years, it is often difficult to predict or fully understand the level of disability or the ongoing functional needs a child may have as they age. Thriving Kids should therefore include regular touchpoints that allow families to re-engage with professionals as needed, so that children can access the right level of supports at the right time.

An example includes:

- NSW's Brighter Beginnings program

3. Enshrine strong equity considerations into access criteria

Learning from NDIS experiences, equitable considerations need to feature strongly in the design of Thriving Kids and be responsive to the many ways in which families may be marginalised, experience vulnerabilities and have difficulties in accessing help.

Key equity considerations:

- Children should not be excluded because of visa or residency status
- Culturally safe processes and practices
- The level of family complexity, alongside a child's delay, should be considered when determining access to more intensive support options under Thriving Kids, including:
    - involvement with child protection
    - more than one child in the family has development delay
    - parent or carer has disability
    - the child is excluded from or not attending ECEC/school
- Allowing sufficient time for families to develop trust and relationships with supports
- Minimise non-attendance rules that result in families losing access to supports

4. Building capacity of educators and education system

Supporting families to navigate and advocate for their children's rights in the education system is a core element of CAFDA's work. The Disability Royal Commission's final report highlighted how the disadvantage experienced by children with disability in education is both complex and deeply entrenched.

While CAFDA welcomes efforts to deliver supports in everyday settings such as ECEC and schools, families have raised real concerns that educators, teachers and the broader education system are not yet equipped with the knowledge and skills to do this effectively, particularly within the ambitious timeframe proposed for Thriving Kids.

> *"Educators need to be skilled up with the knowledge and also the capacity to implement strategies."*

> *"Inclusion aids and integration staff are often lacking training in communication, behaviour management and are poorly equipped to help with learning."*

To achieve an effective national system of support outside the NDIS, there must be significant investment in building the education workforce's understanding of disability, and in embedding inclusive, evidence-based practices.

Families also report that allied health professionals sometimes provide strategies that are not feasible for educators to implement in practice. This highlights the importance of ensuring educators are recognised as key stakeholders in Thriving Kids reform, with attention given to understanding their professional needs, building their skills, and designing program delivery that is realistic and responsive to children's everyday environments.

5. Other considerations for the Committee

Clarity and transparency for families

For many families, the NDIS is the only system they have known. The lack of clarity and communication about the changes, both in relation to the introduction of Thriving Kids and the supports available for children who 'age out' of Thriving Kids but are not NDIS participants, has created immense community distress.

It is critical to bring families along on the reform journey through clear and transparent communication about the changes and the respective roles of Thriving Kids, the NDIS and other support systems.

Consistency of best practice approaches

The creation of a new stream of supports for children risks inconsistent approaches if Thriving Kids and the NDIS are not aligned. All supports, regardless of stream, should reflect best practice and align with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention.

Appendix A: Consultation with families

CAFDA has undertaken extensive work consulting with families about what is and isn't working in the current service system, and what they want from early childhood intervention and allied health supports. This includes:

- Submission to the Education and Health Standing Committee's inquiry into supports for autistic children and young people in WA schools (2023)
- Snapshot: Foundational Supports – what works for families (*n*=37; 2024)
- Consultation with families to test a lead practitioner model in early learning and school settings (*n*=37; 2024)
- Consultation to inform the Review of Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention (*n*=97; 2024)
- Consultation to test the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention (*n*=125; 2025)
- Families' perspectives on implications of NDIS therapy travel price limits (*n*= 353; 2025)