

**INQUIRY INTO FOUNDATIONAL AND DISABILITY
SUPPORTS AVAILABLE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Australian Association of Psychologists Inc
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Feedback to the Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and young People in NSW

To the Committee,

The Australian Association of Psychologists incorporated (AAPi) thanks the House of Representatives Select Committee on Foundational and Additional Supports Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales for the opportunity to have input into this enquiry. AAPi is the leading not-for-profit peak body representing psychologists Australia-wide. We advocate for increasing access and affordability so all Australians can receive the psychological support and services they need when they need it. The AAPi is committed to supporting the mental health and well-being of children and young people in New South Wales.

Please see our responses to the submission questions below.

(1) That a select committee be established to inquire into and report on child development, early childhood intervention services and other foundational and disability supports available for children and young people with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities in New South Wales, and in particular:

(a) the role of such services and supports on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing

Early childhood is a critical period for a child's development, laying the foundation for their future health, learning, and social well-being. For children and young people in New South Wales with developmental concerns, delays, differences, or disabilities, early intervention services and disability supports play a vital role in addressing challenges and fostering potential.

With potential changes proposed to the way early intervention supports are provided under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), it is important to ensure that services that target child development are widely available to children within their local communities and that they have choices about which services are most convenient for them to access. These services need to enable families to access allied health professionals such as speech therapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, and physiotherapists, who provide evidence-based strategies and assessments tailored to a child's unique needs and focus on building skills, overcoming developmental delays and promoting independence, enhancing a child's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. The affordability of allied health professional care is a significant issue for families and needs to be supported by the state government if the intention is to bridge gaps in current service provision. These services also need to be available in such a way as not to impede parents from employment and other responsibilities. In the past, services such as the child development service were not available at such times as would fit easily outside of the average working day. This meant that families had to have at least one parent who was able to have time off work or carer duties to attend the service. With the rate of employment of the parents of disabled children significantly lower than that of parents of abled children, this disparity needs to be addressed, and measures put in place to facilitate their engagement in the workforce as much as possible by having flexibility in the services that are provided at child development services.

The school system also needs to be able to provide services to assess and intervene where educational support needs are identified in children throughout their education journey. Often, schools are overburdened and under-resourced, leaving little resources available to identify and address these concerns. Many only have qualified staff available on an extremely part-time basis, resulting in long delays in providing assessment services such as IQ and ability testing that would inform education planning. Additional teacher aid allocations and higher ratios of time for psychologists, speech therapists, and occupational therapists to provide assessment and inclusion support in schools are required so that all children can meet their educational needs. There is often a lack of assistive technology available within schools to address the support needs of students. Access to AAC devices in the classroom, one-on-one teacher aid support, or hearing support, etc, is often challenging and needs to be addressed so that children can have access to the resources that would support their inclusion.

Community programs, including inclusive playgroups, peer-support networks, and parent education programs, further complement professional services, providing children and families with enriching environments that nurture relationships, resilience, and a sense of belonging. These early supports can significantly improve a child's overall development, health, and well-being, enhancing their quality of life and extending their health span. By identifying and addressing developmental challenges early, children are better equipped to achieve milestones, thrive in educational settings, and participate meaningfully in their communities. Families also benefit from these services, receiving guidance, emotional support, and respite care through professional carers and disability support workers. Access to integrated services ensures that children and young people receive holistic care, reducing the risk of long-term challenges and fostering sustainable growth. By promoting inclusion and early skill-building, these foundational supports create opportunities for children to lead fulfilling lives and build a strong basis for a thriving future.

(b) the types of services and supports available and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services and supports in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote New South Wales, including medical, community-nursing, allied health services, NDIS services and other service delivery models

Children and young people with disabilities in regional, rural, and remote settings in New South Wales face unique challenges that stem from the geographic and resource disparities in these areas. Evidence shows that children and young people with disability experience violence, abuse, and neglect at rates considerably higher than their peers.

The limited availability of psychologists to provide timely assessment and support results in delayed access to crucial specialist support for the children, their families, and school staff. The scarcity of psychologists in these regions exacerbates the difficulties in addressing the specific needs of children with disabilities, including tailored educational strategies and psychological support. There are significant issues around accessing support for these children and their families, as paediatricians or psychologists with specific areas of endorsement are often required to provide evidence in some schools or for some federal funding.

The remoteness of these areas may also impact the accessibility of healthcare services, making it challenging for families to access timely interventions. To enhance the well-being and educational outcomes of children with disabilities in regional, rural, and remote settings, there is a pressing need for increased investment in mental health resources, training and retention opportunities for local psychologists, and the reinstatement of diverse pathways in psychology training such as the 4+2 program that can bridge the geographical gaps and provide comprehensive assistance for these individuals and their communities.

Where families are able to access providers of support for their children, these are often financially inaccessible or have waitlists that are too long to provide any early intervention services. Increasing the rebates for psychologists available through Medicare to \$150 is essential, as is increasing the number of Medicare subsidised sessions available and introducing early intervention Medicare items.

(c) the role of diagnostic services, existing gaps and barriers, and measures to improve effectiveness, availability and access of such services

Psychology diagnostic services are crucial in identifying developmental concerns, delays, differences, or disabilities in children and young people. These assessments provide a comprehensive understanding of a child's strengths and challenges, guiding the development of tailored, evidence-based interventions that address their unique needs. For families in New South Wales, such services often serve as the gateway to accessing crucial supports, including early intervention, NDIS funding, and school-based accommodations.

However, gaps and barriers remain in the availability and accessibility of these services. Long waitlists, high out-of-pocket costs, geographic disparities, and limited culturally sensitive practices often delay diagnosis and intervention, particularly for families in rural and remote areas or from diverse backgrounds. These challenges can result in missed opportunities for early support, exacerbating developmental challenges and placing unnecessary strain on families and the broader system.

Current referral criteria for psychologists through the health system (Medicare) do not allow for intelligence, achievement or diagnostic assessments outside of the very restricted allowance through eligible disability or complex neurodevelopmental disorders assessment and treatment items that most children would not be eligible for due to the restrictive criteria. For early intervention efforts to be effective, children need to be assessed appropriately and thoroughly so that targeted interventions that are informed by evidence can take place.

Improving the effectiveness, availability, and access to diagnostic services requires a multifaceted approach. The critical steps are to increase funding for public and community-based psychology services, expand telehealth options, and train a larger workforce of psychologists skilled in developmental and neurodiversity-affirming care. Streamlining referral pathways and integrating multidisciplinary teams can ensure comprehensive, efficient, and resource-effective assessments. Additionally, promoting public awareness about the importance of early diagnosis and intervention can help reduce stigma and encourage families to seek support sooner. Equitable access to diagnostic services is

essential not only for addressing developmental challenges but also for giving all children an equal opportunity to reach their potential, thrive in their environments, and lead fulfilling lives. Addressing these systemic barriers creates a foundation for better outcomes for children, their families, and the wider community.

(d) gaps and barriers to accessing early childhood intervention and their impact on a child's overall development, health and wellbeing, as well as on their family or carers and other government services and systems

Barriers to safe, quality, and inclusive education for children with disabilities across New South Wales are multifaceted and hinder their holistic development. Physical barriers, including inaccessible buildings and classrooms, limit full participation in health, community and educational activities. Insufficient resources, such as funding, specialised materials, and trained staff, contribute to inadequate support. Negative attitudes, stigma, and discrimination from educators, peers, and the community create an unwelcoming environment, fostering social isolation. Inadequate health care and teacher training further exacerbate these challenges, hindering the creation of inclusive and accommodating environments. Bullying and harassment add to the vulnerability of children and young people with disabilities, impeding their engagement in a safe and supportive community and educational settings.

Children, young people, and their families experience barriers when any staff member who comes into contact with them is not trained in their tertiary education or workplaces to understand special needs. The absence of assistive technologies, limited access to tailored support services, and inflexible service operational times pose additional obstacles to disabled children's academic and social development. Insufficient collaboration and communication between stakeholders, including educators, support staff, parents, and healthcare professionals, hinder the comprehensive support needed. Addressing these barriers requires a collective effort to create inclusive policies, provide adequate resources, foster positive attitudes, and promote collaboration to ensure that every child, regardless of ability, has access to a safe, quality, and inclusive state.

Inadequate levels of support for children and young people with disabilities in communities can have profound psychological and well-being impacts on both the students and their families. When children do not receive the necessary support tailored to their individual needs, it can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, and diminished self-esteem. Academic challenges coupled with a lack of assistance may contribute to heightened stress and anxiety levels, plus other significant behavioural challenges. Moreover, the psychological strain on parents and families is significant as they grapple with the emotional toll of witnessing their child's struggles and the frustration of navigating systems that fall short of meeting their child's requirements. The overall well-being of both the children and their families can be compromised, with potential long-term effects on mental health. Adequate support across communities and services encompasses tailored health, support and educational plans, accessibility measures, and psychological assistance. These factors are essential to mitigate these adverse impacts and foster positive and inclusive environments for children with disabilities and their families.

A growing concern under Federal funding frameworks like the NDIS is the widening gap in access to support for children who need early intervention but are being removed from the scheme. Many families report that children with developmental delays or disabilities are deemed ineligible for ongoing support despite clear evidence of their need for intervention. This can leave children without access to vital services, such as speech therapy, psychology, occupational therapy, and behavioural support during critical developmental windows. As a result, families are left floundering, either unable to afford private services or facing long waitlists in the public system. The loss of NDIS support often leads to significant stress for families, exacerbates developmental challenges for the child, and risks long-term social and economic costs due to untreated or poorly managed conditions.

To address this gap, there must be a transparent review of eligibility criteria and a focus on maintaining access to early intervention supports for children at risk of falling through the cracks. Ensuring children remain on the scheme until their developmental progress stabilises can prevent the regression of skills and reduce the need for more intensive supports later in life. Additionally, creating transitional programs for children exiting the NDIS can provide continuity of care and prevent families from feeling abandoned. Currently, they are being exited to nothing at all. A more inclusive and flexible approach to funding early intervention ensures that children receive the equitable support they need to thrive, giving them and their families a fairer chance at achieving long-term success and well-being.

(e) opportunities to increase engagement across sectors and improved collaboration across both government and non-government services, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, early learning services, educational settings and health services

Opportunities to increase engagement and improve collaboration across sectors in New South Wales lies in fostering truly integrated service models that bring together government, non-government services, and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Establishing formal partnerships and co-designed programs can help align goals, share resources, and build trust across diverse stakeholders. Early learning services, educational settings, and health services can work collaboratively to identify developmental concerns early, share data, and implement holistic intervention plans tailored to each child's needs. Embedding culturally safe practices and involving ACCO's in service planning ensures that Aboriginal children and families receive support that respects their heritage and community knowledge. Cross-sector training and shared professional development initiatives can enhance communication and understanding between educators, health professionals, and disability specialists. By creating collaborative networks and prioritising multidisciplinary approaches, services can deliver more seamless, coordinated, and accessible care, ultimately improving outcomes for children and young people with developmental challenges.

(f) other government or best practice child development and early childhood intervention service models and programs operating outside of New South Wales

The National Early Childhood Program for Children with Disability and Developmental Concerns (NECP) supports young children (aged 0-8 years) with disability or developmental concerns and their parents and carers.

Playconnect+ is funded under the 'Support and connection for young children with disability or developmental concerns' grant. It provides facilitated support, such as playgroups and music programs, to young children (aged 0-8 years) with disability or developmental concerns. This helps to increase children's readiness for school and provides an opportunity for them to socialise in a supported and family-centred environment. Playconnect+ delivers face-to-face sessions in all states and territories during school terms. During school holidays, there are specific online and face-to-face activities. Visit the [Playconnect+](https://playconnectplus.com.au) website or contact the project coordinator at info@playconnectplus.com.au.

ENVISAGE-Families is funded under the 'Support and connection for parents and carers of young children with disability or developmental concerns' grant. It provides:

- facilitated workshops for parents and carers of young children (aged 0-8 years) with a newly identified disability or for whom there are developmental concerns
- opportunities for families early in their journey to access evidence-based information, family-focused strategies and peers with similar experiences
- 5 workshops facilitated by early child development professionals and parents with lived experience of raising children with developmental concerns
- at-home modules.

ENVISAGE-Families delivers face-to-face sessions in all states and territories and includes the option of online workshops.

Visit the [Envisage](https://envisage.acu.edu.au) website or contact envisage@acu.edu.au.

(g) workforce issues in the child development and early childhood intervention sectors, including workforce demand and the availability, quality and capacity of existing workers,

The AAPI suggests increased mental health resourcing in NSW to support children and young people with a disability, including increasing the provision of psychologists in schools to address the growing mental health needs of students, ensuring early intervention and support, and raising the Medicare rebate to \$150 for all children and families to eliminate access and affordability issues related to psychological services. Disabled children and young people do not exist in silos; students with self-reported disabilities exhibit attitudes and behaviours that are consistent with studies of students who are alienated from their school communities. Community-based health promotion interventions are required to address these issues to prevent the onset of secondary disease processes or additional disability.

We further encourage school-wide neurodiversity-affirming practices that embrace the uniqueness and strengths of neurodivergent children and provide them and their families

with the skills, tools, and strategies to allow for improved participation within the home, school, and play environments. This may involve:

- Seeking to understand the needs of neurodivergent children from their perspective and adapting the environment to meet these needs.
- Understanding and respecting neurodivergent communication styles.
- Understanding and accommodating individual sensory needs.
- Encouraging neurodivergent rather than neurotypical listening skills.
- Assisting in developing self-advocacy and problem-solving skills.
- Teaching children to understand better the emotions, behaviours, and communication of other people around them so they can better choose how they want to respond.
- Validating children's feelings, helping them recognise their triggers, and assisting in identifying calming strategies.
- Recognising the need for processing time and safe spaces.
- Encouraging safe self-regulation skills, including stimming.
- Adopting neurodiversity-affirming language

Neurodiversity-affirming therapy does not involve:

- Promoting masking, loss of autonomy, or loss of personal agency.
- Eliminating stimming behaviours.
- Developing goals that seek to "cure" neurodivergent behaviours.

(i) any other related matter.

Improving outcomes for students with disabilities yields significant social, economic, and personal benefits for both individuals and society. Socially, fostering an inclusive educational environment promotes diversity, empathy, and understanding, contributing to a more compassionate and accepting society. Students with disabilities who receive tailored support experience enhanced social integration and build positive relationships with their peers, fostering a sense of belonging. Economically, investing in inclusive education prepares students with disabilities for meaningful participation in the workforce, reducing dependency on social support systems and contributing to a more skilled and diverse labour market. It also fosters innovation by tapping into the unique perspectives and talents of individuals with disabilities.

On a personal level, improved educational outcomes empower children and young people with disabilities, boosting their confidence, self-esteem, and overall well-being. By breaking down barriers and providing equal opportunities, society benefits from the diverse contributions and achievements of individuals with disabilities, fostering a more equitable and thriving community. The concept of wellbeing from disabled children's perspective is described as feeling supported, included, and respected, as well as feeling valued and capable, and this needs to sit in the centre of New South Wales policies and practices to facilitate this.

Thank you for allowing us to provide our recommendations to the inquiry. We look forward to working with you to better support the experience of all children and young people with disabilities in New South Wales, their families and communities.

Sincerely,

Amanda Curran
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Australian Association of Psychologists Incorporated