

Joint Submission NDIS Independent Review

re: Priority Area for Improvement No. 4 – Early Childhood Supports

August 2023

The following submission is drawn from a collective response received from ECIA VIC/TAS members in relation to **Priority Area for Improvement No. 4 - Early Childhood Supports** from the **NDIS Independent Review**.

Findings from the NDIS Independent Review found that early intervention for children is frequently not based on best practice and there is not enough support built around families and helping children to be included in their local community.

The question asked:

What is the best way to support children with disability and those with emerging developmental concerns?

Collective Response:

It has been evidenced through research and practice that the best way of supporting children with disability and developmental delay is through a family-centred, capacity building and collaborative approach that uses the child's everyday environments. In essence this is a relational-based model that has challenges in the current NDIS business model. The impact of the NDIS funding model has seen families opting for single therapy and clinic-based service delivery models rather than family-centred coordinated services. Policy, process and funding changes are needed to optimise early childhood supports that use [best practice](#).

A good support model should not only centre on the child, but also on their family and kinship. A transdisciplinary team approach that uses a key worker model is better equipped to support families. Through having a main point of contact, families can be assisted with coordinating supports that meet their unique circumstances and where a team can be formed around them and their child. This would include early intervention, allied health, education, and health professionals. Children should be assisted to develop functional living skills in their everyday routines and environments through building the capacity of those people who spend the most time with them.

Support should be delivered in the child's home, community, educational setting, and any other place that learning occurs in everyday living. This is best delivered by a key worker, with support of a transdisciplinary team, that include allied health professionals and teachers. A key worker can also assist with coordinating and collaborating with other services and supports. This provides better outcomes for the child and family where strategies are consistent across all settings, embedded into what they do in their everyday routines, and employs a capacity building approach.

Good support starts with a buy-in from families. Therefore, a robust method of information acquisition at the start of a family's journey is needed. Information should include the benefits of best practice and what this looks like in service delivery.

Consistent and easy to understand information needs to be available through health professionals, early childhood professionals, Early Childhood Partners, and the NDIS. This will assist families to make informed decisions when choosing services and to help them guide the process.

Prior to children accessing NDIS funding families can be supported to navigate early childhood supports and systems through the Early Childhood Approach (ECA), but further funding is required to do this more consistently and effectively. Families can be supported through their Early Childhood Partner (ECP) by having one main point of contact to act as their key worker or case worker throughout the process of navigating services and accessing supports. The ECP should also meet the needs of families from diverse backgrounds and cultures with recruitment of workers that represent the community that they work in.

Families need flexible and collaborative services that looks at the support needs of the whole family, not just the child in isolation. Supports outside of the NDIS should include informal supports, peer support groups, mental health services, respite, and supportive mainstream services, such as playgroups, childcare, kindergarten, and schools. However, community capacity building and evidence on how these supports can be designed and structured for better outcomes is required.

Other supports, apart from Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services, that can provide families with assistance include the education and health systems. Better access to paediatricians and paediatric psychiatrists and developmental assessment teams that are affordable for families is needed. Health professionals need to have access to current information on the ECA to connect families appropriately and have a good understanding of service delivery models that are based on best practice. A well-resourced education system that provides families with program choices and settings would also provide support. A system of communication and collaboration between universal early childhood and education systems and early intervention needs to be more formalised.

Aligned with good service provision is the availability of a skilled workforce. Workforce issues in early childhood supports require further incentives and investments. Learning and development also needs to prioritise training and mentoring in best practice and in the role of a key worker in ECI. In the early childhood and education system, professional development on inclusive practices, either as pre- or in-service training and specialist supports are essential elements of upskilling universal services.

More incentives and accountability requirements to ensure that early intervention providers deliver evidence-based supports and best practice in ECI could be supported through policy, process, and in the way that Early Supports are funded through the NDIS.