



**Association for
Children with a
Disability**

COVID Recovery Plan

Victorian children and young people with disability and their families

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

Our vision is that children with a disability and their families have the same rights and opportunities as all children and families.

During COVID more than 30,000 Victorian families with children with disability connected with ACD to get the most up-to-date information and support for their child and family. Their experiences inform this COVID Recovery Plan.

Impact of COVID on children and families

The full impact of COVID on Victorian children is not fully known. But already there is evidence of children having increased mental health issues, education outcomes being impacted by remote and flexible learning, families feeling exhausted and less employment opportunities for school leavers.

Key areas of need are:

- **Education**
- **Mental health and well-being**
- **Support for families**
- **Support for school leavers**
- **Safety of children**

Our COVID Recovery Plan offers a solution-based approach to ensure the specific needs of children with disability and their families are addressed in the COVID recovery.

Education

After a long period of remote and flexible learning, students with disability need targeted support to ensure they can enjoy the benefits of being back at school.

Keep schools open and safe

The Murdoch Children's Research Institute has undertaken significant research on the transmission of COVID in schools and the practices to ensure schools remain open and safe for all students. Improve accessible and timely communication for students, families and educators on the COVID safe arrangements that are in place. Continue to invest in research so that infection control practices in Victorian schools are informed by global evidence, with a focus on students who are medically vulnerable and those who receive personal care at school, so all schools remain open and safe.

Support a positive return to school

Students with disability are suspended and expelled at higher rates than non-disabled students. This includes informal suspensions. Many students are suspended without appropriate Individual Education Plans, Student Support Groups or Behaviour Support Plans in place. The return to school after a long period of remote and flexible learning will be challenging for some students. Ensure resourcing and support for students is in place, so that no student with disability is suspended or expelled during the return to school.

Targeted support for students with disability

The announcement of catch-up support for Victorian students is a significant investment and a very welcome approach. There needs to be implementation guidance and accountability to ensure students with disability in both mainstream and specialist school settings receive the support they need. This initiative must promote the use of evidence-based inclusive teaching and learning practices.

Re-engage students with disability

Remote and flexible learning has resulted in some students disengaging from education. A welcome increase in investment in Navigator and Lookout has been announced. To ensure this investment benefits all students, professional development is urgently required for all Navigator and Lookout staff to build their skills and understanding to meet the specific needs of students with disability. There is also an ongoing need to flexibly apply eligibility criteria for these programs as well as ensuring schools proactively support student engagement.

Guaranteed interim funding for students with disability

No student with disability should start school next year without appropriate funding in place. Where Program for Students with Disabilities funding is still under consideration due to delays with applications, interim funding should be made available so that appropriate supports are in place from day one of Term 1 2021.

Build new schools that are inclusive

Investment into building new schools and upgrading school facilities should meet the needs of all students, rather than creating separate settings for students with disability. Based on best practice examples, such as Armstrong Creek School, all new schools must be inclusive.

Mental health and well-being

Children and young people with intellectual disability and autistic young people have significantly higher rates of mental health issues compared with non-disabled young people.

Mental health investment to meet the needs of children and young people with disability

We welcome the significant investment in youth mental health programs and the expansion of Mental Health Practitioners to all secondary schools in Victoria. This investment must benefit all young people. Co-design with students is urgently required as well as resourcing of professional development to increase the capacity of all school well-being staff and Mental Health Practitioners to better support young people with disability.

Support for families as the front line of care

Families are the front line of care and support for children and young people with mental health issues. Build the capacity of youth mental health services and over the phone services such as Beyond Blue and Parentline to provide dedicated support that meets the needs of families caring for children and young people with mental health issues and disability.

Support for families

The evidence is clear — children do better when families are supported.

Quick and easy changes to NDIS Plans

Many families in Victoria have utilised their child's NDIS Plan in different ways from what was anticipated. Many children now have limited funds remaining. Quick and easy changes to Plans are required to ensure children have support in place, especially for the upcoming summer school holidays. Changes to be made within the 28 day timeline stated in the NDIS Service Guarantee.

NDIS support for families in their caring role

Many Victorian families with children with disability are exhausted. Practical support such as additional funding for Support Workers offers families and children a break, giving them a chance to re-energise. NDIS Planners and Local Area Co-ordinators (LACs) should be mandated to ask about support needs in all discussions with families, and offer flexible and innovative options that meet the needs of the child and family.

Expansion of Outside School Hours Care for children with disability

The capacity of families to undertake paid work is dependent on quality accessible care for their children. Families with children with disability often have limited access to Outside School Hours Care (OSHC), as these programs are not available at all specialist schools and programs at mainstream schools are not always inclusive. Support families to work by expanding the OSHC Demonstration Program and support existing OSHC programs to provide an inclusive service.

Increase peer support for families

Peer support offers tangible and practical support for families. Ensure the continuation of MyTime, build the reach of the Strengthening Parent Support Program and expand free parenting programs such as Triple P, Tuning into Teens and Working out Dads. Particular attention is needed to support siblings, as many sibling relationships have become strained.

Support for school leavers

Young people with disability have higher unemployment rates than their non-disabled peers. Targeted support can help young people transition from school to work.

Increase self-advocacy support and mentoring for young people

Expand existing successful youth mentoring and employment programs such as Ticket to Work and Australian Network on Disability, and increase self-advocacy support for young people with disability.

Champion high expectations

Evidence shows that families play a critical role in supporting young people with disability to access employment. Invest in building the aspirations and confidence of families to support career education and post-school pathways.

Expand youth employment initiatives to include young people with disability

Many young people with disability are automatically registered for the Disability Support Pension (DSP) upon leaving school. Many of these young people are ready to work and would hugely benefit from the DSP being included in the JobMaker Hiring Credit Scheme, as this would incentivise employers to employ young people with disability. Targeted focus is also required to ensure young people with disability gain traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities through the Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements initiative.

Safety of children

We need to ensure our safety net for children with disability is strong.

Disability confident Child Protection and Residential Support workforce

Dedicated and ongoing training for the Child Protection and Residential Support workforce is required to ensure that children in the most vulnerable situations have their disability support needs met and their disability appropriately recognised as a risk factor for abuse and neglect.

NDIS literate child and family workforce

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, in partnership with ACD, has delivered professional development training on 'NDIS support for families at risk' to more than 1,700 child and family practitioners. This training needs to be continued and expanded to ensure the early childhood workforce is confident in how the NDIS can support children and families.

Transparency around children with disability in Child Protection and Youth Justice

To best support children and young people with disability, there needs to be accurate reporting and transparency around the number of children involved with Child Protection and Youth Justice who have NDIS Plans, Plan utilisation levels, education experiences and care settings.

For more information, please contact:

Karen Dimmock
CEO, Association for Children with a Disability
karend@acd.org.au
03 9880 7000