



Association for  
Children with a  
Disability

## Association for Children with Disability

### Snapshot: Making kindergarten more inclusive for children with disability and their families

April 2023

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#### Background

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

In March 2023, ACD held two online consultations with families of children with disability to understand their experience of kindergarten.

This consultation is timely. As the Victorian Government continues to roll out free three- and four-year-old kindergarten, and looks to transition to 30-hours of 'Pre-Prep' from 2025, it's more important than ever that kindergarten is inclusive and accessible for all Victorian children.

This snapshot is a starting point to understanding the kindergarten experiences of children with disability and their families. It provides an overview of what worked for families to create an inclusive kindergarten experience, and highlights areas for improvement.

# What makes kindergarten successful?

## 1. A disability-confident early childhood workforce

For many families, the key to a successful kindergarten experience were educators and teachers who prioritised communication and partnerships with families.

*"Having teachers that 'got' my child, that supported their development [made kindergarten successful]."*

Families also spoke about the importance of staff who had prior experience, confidence, and skills in working with children with disability and meeting their individual needs. Anecdotally, existing knowledge and skills of working with children with disability led to more focus on communication and understanding families' invaluable knowledge of their child.

*"[It's important to have] staff that listen even if they have experience with disability – every child is different and us parents know our kids [best]."*

Conversely, when educators and teachers had limited knowledge and understanding of disability and the importance of working with families, the experience of kindergarten was less positive. For example, families raised concern that educators and teachers were given insufficient pre-service training to be confident in understanding inclusion, and making adjustments that met the needs of individual children. When asked what they would change to make kindergarten better for children with disability, one family noted:

*"Better training for staff on disability awareness and accommodations. Staff that can lead families in inclusion, not be trained by families."*

Limited workforce knowledge and understanding of disability contributed to challenges for families, who spoke about the risk of all disabilities being seen as alike. Families advocated for more training and understanding that children with disability are as unique and individual as children without disability, with individual needs.

*"Educate teachers on disabilities and how all children are different."*

Connection and engagement with peers were seen as key ingredients in making kindergarten a successful experience for families. However, it was noted that limited understanding of inclusion can lead to exclusion, raising concerns about children's development and peer engagement.

*"More education for staff about what inclusion looks like – it's more than access."*

## 2. Strengthening support

Disability-confident educators and teachers can go a long way to creating inclusive kindergarten programs for all children and families, not just children with disability. However, some children need additional support to maintain engagement in early learning, beyond the standard resourcing.

While programs like Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) can have a big impact on the kindergarten experience of children with disability and their families, families consistently reported significant changes to Kindergarten Inclusion Support are needed.

Issues with Kindergarten Inclusion Support raised by families include:

- Inconsistent knowledge of the program, including the application process, within the early childhood workforce. Families discussed the added difficulty accessing KIS when staff didn't have knowledge of the program or recent experience applying. Families spoke about intentionally looking for services with recent KIS experience to ensure the application process started during Term 4 the prior year so supports were in place for the start of the new year
- Narrow criteria, making it difficult to access. This was particularly challenging for children with rare disabilities, and those without a diagnosis. The complexity of the process and requirement for documentation led to significant delays in accessing support
- Onerous application process for the family and early childhood workforce. This may be a contributing factor to staff reluctance to apply for the program
- Complexity for families and staff in navigating KIS *and* the Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program for children attending long day care. For example, one family enrolled in long day care spoke about being discouraged from enrolling their child in a funded sessional kindergarten program, due to difficulties in accessing KIS
- Confusion about the intent and purpose of the program. This included whether the program had intended outcomes, and the role of additional assistants in working one on one with the child who received funding
- Inability to access funded support for the full hours of attendance
- Being told their child could only attend if an additional educator was present.

Inability to gain access to timely supports for children, led to significant stress for families and the risk of poorer learning outcomes through delayed access to vital supports that supported their participation.

A number of families spoke about the desire for smaller class sizes or lower staff to child ratios, reflecting a concern that their child was not receiving enough support based on their needs.

Families also reported that early learning services told them their child could not attend if they weren't successful in accessing the additional assistant under Kindergarten Inclusion Support.

*"Make the whole Kindergarten Inclusion Support/inclusion funding application process EASIER – it is laborious, the paperwork and meetings and amount of time it takes to get this in place."*

*"After starting, [my child] was diagnosed with autism. Kindergarten Inclusion Support was applied for. It didn't get approved until June. No one started till August."*

*"We were told they were not going to apply for Kindergarten Inclusion Support funding because my child was not harming anyone, and another child had funding so they didn't want any more."*

### 3. “Whole of setting” approach to inclusion

Families reflected on the importance of good practice shown by early childhood education and care services in meeting their needs and the needs of their children.

Families gave examples of good practice such as:

- Making kinder-wide accommodations to build inclusion for all children
- Individual goals or learning plans for children with disability
- Spaces and activities for sensory regulation
- Continuing to support children and families while absent due to medical and health issues
- Teaching all children how to communicate with non-verbal children
- Timely access to the right adaptive equipment for their child
- Ensuring all services are built in line with Universal Design principles
- Using visual schedules and instructions
- Strong transitions into kinder, and Prep
- Supporting families, as well as the workforce, to build inclusive attitudes

These limited examples demonstrate the breadth of ways families feel kindergarten services can demonstrate good, inclusive practices. They also speak to changes needed at a systems level to embed inclusion.

*“[It’s important that] management understand and promote inclusion – so it all starts from top down to the staff.”*

### 4. Working together with NDIS funded services

When early learning services had strong connections with NDIS funded allied health professionals, families spoke positively about their kindergarten experience and the benefits for their child.

Families discussed the importance of alignment, consistency, and a shared understanding of strategies to support their child’s individual needs and goals between allied health, early childhood teachers and educators, and families.

Enabling children and families to access allied health services onsite was important for families, which ensured their child didn’t miss out and provided more holistic support.

*“The ability to have therapists (physio etc) be able to attend a typical day-care/kinder [made kindergarten successful].”*

## 5. Choice

Families consistently highlighted choice as an essential element in making kindergarten successful. Many families highlighted choice as an area they would most like to see change to improve their kindergarten experience.

Many families want access to a high-quality service of their choice in their local area. For families of children with disability, being able to choose a service can be the difference in whether their child is included or not.

*"One kinder was so open they wanted us to come."*

Families spoke powerfully about the difference it made in accessing an inclusive service with "amazing staff". Until all services embed inclusion, families of children with disability need access to greater choice of service to ensure their children don't miss out.

*"We were very blessed by the kinder we had our [child] attend. We applied through council and were accepted to our preference. The educators were brilliant. They took time to understand our daughter... There were many steps but they were happy to make any adjustments."*

### Family feedback

All 17 families who attended the consultations identified as primary carers. This included two men and 15 women. Their children are aged between 2 and 7 years old, with the majority (12 children) aged 4 or 5. Almost one quarter of attendees live in a regional area. Three families identified as being from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

### For more information contact

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