



Association for
Children with a
Disability

Association for Children with Disability

2024 Victorian State Budget Submission

November 2023

About ACD

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.

For more than 40 years we have been advocating to improve the lives of children with disability and their families. Our focus is families raising children with disability or developmental delay from birth to 18. We support all disability. We empower families, build inclusive practice and advocate to advance the rights of children with disability.

Our vision is an inclusive community where children with disability and their families thrive.

Acknowledgement

ACD acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We commit to working in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations as they lead change for Aboriginal communities, families, and children.

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Setting the scene

Families raising children with disability want the best for their children. They want their children to get a great education, to have the supports they need to engage in their local community and with their friends, and they want their children to be happy.

ACD's support for families spans childhood ages and stages – from the early years to becoming a teenager, and from accessing early intervention through to navigating the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

ACD has seen a marked increase in the number of calls to our Support Line since the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic which shows increasing complexity in families' lives. We have seen an increase in the number of calls that require enhanced support, of families reporting their child has been excluded from early learning or school, and challenges accessing the right support.

While families have faced many challenges, there have been opportunities to celebrate positive change. Victoria is rolling-out Disability Inclusion reforms in schools, investing in the early years so children can get the best start to life, and is continuing to invest in vital advocacy services and supports.

Through this state budget, Victoria can ensure families raising children with disability get the most out of government's significant reform agenda.

Recommendations

1. Commit to ongoing funding for the Family Services Specialist Disability Practitioners and the Children with Complex Disability Support Needs program.
2. Build on the Disability Inclusion reforms by investing in the Disability Royal Commission recommendations.
3. Immediately expand eligibility for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support program.
4. Permanently increase the baseline funding for disability advocacy services.

1. Fund the Family Services Specialist Disability Practitioners and the Children with Complex Disability Support Needs program

When families raising children with disability get the right level of support early, they thrive. But if support isn't available when families need it most, the risk of poor outcomes is higher. For example, when families can't get the right disability supports in place to cope and stay safe, children with disability are at higher risk of being voluntarily relinquished.

The Victorian Government funds two initiatives that help families access much needed support for their children, and help families remain together – Family Services Specialist Disability Practitioners and the Children with Complex Disability Support Needs program. Together, these programs support families to navigate complex service systems, access the NDIS, and promote sustainability of care that prevents families from breaking down.

Each year, Family Specialist Services Disability Practitioners support approximately 900 families (1800 children), while the Children with Complex Disability Support Needs program supports approximately 175 families (350 children).

Despite the vital role these programs play, they continue to face funding uncertainty. The Victorian Government should commit to permanently funding these programs so families raising children with disability can get the support they need.

2. Fund the Disability Royal Commission recommendations

The Disability Royal Commission is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to take a strategic approach to improving outcomes for people with disability. The final report into the education system highlighted many areas for improvement.

ACD receives more calls about education than any other issue. Families report challenges for their children can include:

- Gatekeeping practices
- Exclusion, suspension and expulsion
- Inconsistent commitment to inclusion at a leadership level
- Lack of reasonable adjustments
- Restrictive practices
- Poor education outcomes
- Lack of systemic accountability

Victoria is laying the foundation for positive change through the Disability Inclusion reforms, but these reforms on their own won't transform the education system.

For example, early analysis of data from ACD's Support Line indicates an *increase* in the number of families seeking support for suspension and/or expulsion in roll-out areas between January 2019 and September 2023. At the same time, the number of students enrolling in distance education and home schooling is sharply on the rise, including overrepresentation of students with disability.

While the Victorian Government will need time to work through the Disability Royal Commission final report to coordinate its response, funding should be put aside in anticipation of implementing a suite of much needed reform. This should include addressing education recommendations that build on the Disability Inclusion reforms to increase system performance and accountability.

3. Expand eligibility for Kindergarten Inclusion Support

Victoria's nation-leading investment in early childhood education will set Victorian children up to get the most out of their early years. Investments such as expanding the Preschool Field Officer program and piloting a new approach for assessing the needs of children with disability are welcome. But on their own, they won't stop children with disability from being excluded from early learning services.

Families continue to report their children being turned away from services, having their access restricted or difficulties obtaining reasonable adjustments. Families regularly report their child is actively discouraged from attending because the service can't access funded supports, or applying is too hard. These challenges are reflected in ACD's data: ACD's Support Line has seen a 700 per cent increase in calls relating to early learning between January 2019 and September 2023.

The Victorian Government should transform the Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) program so that it's fit-for-purpose. As an interim measure, government should immediately expand the eligibility for KIS. This would reduce pressure on the early childhood workforce and give more children with disability the additional support they need so they can make the most out of the government's Best Start, Best Life reforms.

4. Sustain bonus disability advocacy funding

Advocacy plays a vital role in promoting, protecting and ensuring people can enact their rights. Each year, ACD supports 15,000 Victorian families raising children with disability through our Support Line, workshops, and information and resources.

Family-led organisations like ACD play a pivotal role in helping families navigate and understand service systems, access the right support and enact their child's rights. However, advocacy services like ACD are often constrained by inadequate funding and funding uncertainty.

The Disability Royal Commission found greater investment is needed in disability advocacy. At a minimum, the Victorian Government should ensure the 50 per cent bonus funding given to organisations funded under the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program is a permanent increase to baseline funding.