



Association for  
Children with a  
Disability

# Association for Children with Disability

## Snapshot: Embedding disability inclusion in Best Start, Best Life

April 2024

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### Context

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.

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

Victoria's nation-leading investment in early childhood education will set Victorian children up to get the most out of their early years. The Best Start, Best Life reforms are an opportunity to deeply embed disability inclusion across all areas of the reform. This will require targeted effort across program design and delivery, workforce considerations and infrastructure needs to ensure children with disability can take advantage of the life-changing benefits of early learning.

This snapshot identifies opportunities for government to embed disability inclusion across its Best Start, Best Life priorities as outlined in three reports: Transforming early childhood education together, Workforce strategy, and Building Blocks – kindergarten infrastructure strategy.

### For more information contact

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## Embedding disability inclusion

Victoria has a high-quality early childhood education system that includes a dedicated, expert workforce and a sector committed to achieving the best outcomes for children. However, gaps remain across the system that create barriers for children with disability or developmental delay in accessing early learning.

ACD's Support Line has seen a 610% increase in calls about early learning between 2019 and 2023. Most calls related to lack of reasonable adjustments and individualised funding support, reduced access to early learning including enrolment being discouraged and children being put on decreased hours, and poor transitions to school.

The Best Start, Best Life strategies can increase their focus on disability inclusion so no Victorian child misses out on high-quality kindergarten.

## Transforming early childhood education together

The following actions and identified priority areas from the *Transforming early childhood education together* report could further embed disability inclusion:

1. Transform inclusion support for children with disability or additional needs. The report notes government is providing \$18 million to strengthen and modernise existing inclusion support for children with disability or additional needs. However, feedback from families is that the current Kindergarten Inclusion Support program isn't fit-for-purpose and needs to be reimaged to better support children with disability's inclusion in early learning.
2. Ensure improved coordination of supports includes the new Foundational Supports as well as the NDIS. The report notes government is improving coordination of supports provided through NDIS services to improve access and strengthen participation of children with additional needs. This is sorely needed to improve best practice and positive outcomes for children. Improving coordination of supports should incorporate ways of embedding foundational supports in early learning settings.
3. Include disability rights, disability confidence and whole-of service approaches to inclusion as areas of professional learning to lift children's learning and development outcomes. The report notes government will work with the sector to develop more holistic supports for kindergarten and pre-prep to focus efforts on lifting children's learning and development outcomes. It also notes professional development will be delivered, including for operational and educational leaders. Families note that when educators, teachers and service leaders are confident about supporting children with disability and take a whole of setting approach to inclusion, outcomes for their children improve.
4. Include a disability lens at each Best Start, Best Life Education Leaders Conference. With such a big reform agenda, the conference is an opportunity to maintain focus on equity and inclusion, including for children with disability.
5. Ensure Building Blocks grants and sector consultation includes meeting physical and sensory needs of children with disability. The report notes government will continue to expand and upgrade buildings to be higher quality and more inclusive. This should include requirements to meet physical and sensory needs.

## Workforce strategy

The following actions and identified priority areas from the *Workforce strategy: Continuing to value and grow the kindergarten workforce* report could further embed disability inclusion:

6. Encourage people with disability to choose a career in early childhood education. The strategy notes government will improve workforce diversity by supporting people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal teachers and educators to join the early learning workforce. Government should develop targeted strategies to include representation of teachers and educators with disability.
7. Improve pre-service training so all teachers and educators feel equipped to support children with disability when they graduate. Pre-service training needs to ensure student placements are giving students access to the skills and support they need to graduate as disability-confident teachers and educators.
8. Ensure teachers and educators can access timely on-the-job support and additional career development to meet the needs of children with disability. The report notes workforce feedback identified they wanted additional support to overcome 'challenges that arise during a day on the floor, such as how to incorporate effective inclusion and support children with a range of learning needs.' There are many areas for action across enhancing the transition from study to practice, supporting career development and workforce wellbeing and supporting effective leadership. It is important that all of these actions include relevant elements on disability inclusion. Government should regularly evaluate its initiatives and programs to ensure they're addressing gaps identified by the workforce to better equip them to meet the needs of children with disability.

## Building Blocks – kindergarten infrastructure strategy

The following actions and identified priority areas from the *Building Blocks – kindergarten infrastructure strategy* report could further embed disability inclusion:

9. Ensure all infrastructure planning and upgrades meet the physical and sensory needs of children with disability. This should include play spaces, government's 50 owned and operated Early Learning Centres and the 180 government-owned kindergartens.
10. Make the 50 Early Learning Centres exemplars of inclusive practice. These Early Learning Centres are an opportunity to showcase best practice approaches to inclusion in physical design as well as service practice and delivery.