



Association for
Children with a
Disability

Association for Children with Disability

Snapshot: Exploring strong Foundational Supports for Victorian children and families

April 2024

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.

On 7 December 2023, the NDIS Review report was released. On the same day, National Cabinet agreed to design additional Foundational Supports, to be jointly commissioned by the Commonwealth and the states.

As governments begin their consultations about the new Foundational Supports, this snapshot aims to contribute to that conversation. It highlights what we know isn't working from families and offers ideas on what foundational support could look like in early learning and school.

ACD will build on this snapshot over the coming months by consulting with families about their aspirations for strong foundational support in Victoria.

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Overview

What did the NDIS Review say?

The NDIS Review report said too many people with disability are missing out on supports because there isn't enough support outside of the NDIS. The report highlighted children with disability aren't always getting the support they need in everyday settings. It recommended changes to increase the amount of support available outside of the NDIS.

The state and federal governments have agreed to three layers of support:

1. Mainstream services to be more inclusive. This includes childcares, kindergartens, schools, healthcare, sport, and recreation.
2. Investing in Foundational Supports. These would support NDIS participants and families, and people not eligible for the NDIS. It would include Navigators, peer support, parent training, allied health, early intervention, and some in-home services like cooking and cleaning.
3. NDIS, which will continue to provide individual support for children and adults with severe and permanent disability.

While Foundational Supports will support all people with disability, the NDIS Review said there should be significant investment in Foundational Supports outside the NDIS for children in the early years, with a focus on children under 9. Wherever possible, support should be delivered in early childhood settings and schools.

Foundational Supports will also give families access to more support through information, peer support and more support to build their skills to support their child.

Strong Foundational Supports

Foundational Supports is an opportunity to reinvigorate how children with disability and their families can access the support they need, when and where they need it most, to create a good life.

For this to be successful, there needs to be careful consideration about what will bolster a more inclusive and accessible mainstream service system, and what can be expanded and developed to form the new Foundational Supports.

Victoria has green shoots that can be elevated and expanded to form the foundational layer – both inside educational settings and in the broader community.

This section outlines areas government should begin to explore for a strong system of Foundational Supports.

Robust design processes

- The Victorian Government should create a child and family specific taskforce to inform Victoria's Foundational Supports to ensure it's fit-for-purpose. The Best Start, Best Life Taskforce provides an effective model.

Targeted foundational support:

1. In early learning

- Lead Practitioners that work in partnership with early learning. A cluster-based approach would provide access to Lead Practitioner allied health support for both individual children and families as well as supporting the early learning setting.

This would boost best practice approaches by supporting individual children and families and build the knowledge and support provided by educators.

2. At school

- Lead Practitioners that work in partnership with schools. A cluster-based approach would provide access to Lead Practitioner allied health support for both individual students and families as well as strengthening school-wide support by building the expertise of school staff, including education support staff, and supporting teachers implement reasonable adjustments.

This would need to meet the needs of children at different ages and stages, including starting school, transitioning to secondary school and planning for life after school.

- Whole of school communication and social skills initiatives. Build student's social and emotional skills in everyday settings and support students to feel connected.

General foundational support:

3. Peer support

- Build a network of trained parent peer workers who mentor and support families, providing guidance and reassurance.
- More investment in the Victorian Government state-wide Strengthening Parent Support Program. Provide parents and carers of children with disability and developmental delay opportunities to connect through peer support groups, information sessions and individual support.
- Targeted investment to increase peer support for specific communities where there are current peer support gaps, such as Arabic speaking and First Nations families.

4. Family-led capacity building and advocacy

- More investment in family-led capacity building on key issues, ages and stages. ACD reaches 15,000 families a year with independent information, capacity building workshops and self-advocacy support. Families report feeling more confident and able to support their child. ACD is one of only a handful of organisations nationwide that provides support to families that is inclusive of all disability and ages 0 to 18. There is significant demand from families for additional capacity building that is developed and delivered by families with children with disability.
- More child and family-focused disability advocacy funding. Families report feeling empowered, having a better understanding of their child's rights and improved outcomes for their children after engaging with child and family focused disability advocacy. This should include funding for organisations like ACD and organisations like YDAS, led by and for young people with disability.

Improve interface between NDIS funded services and education

Despite the best efforts of early learning settings, schools and therapists, the interface between NDIS funded services and education is clunky at best. This means the planning which can set up students for success does not occur.

Options for improved interface, including establishing clusters of preferred providers, needs to be on the table.

Making mainstream services more inclusive

The foundational layer needs to be viewed in the context of making mainstream services like childcares, kindergartens and schools more inclusive.

Education remains the number one advocacy issue raised by families. ACD receives hundreds of calls each year from families raising children with disability about challenges in education from early learning to school. This reflects the findings from the NDIS Review and Disability Royal Commission that mainstream services like education can and should do more to support children with disability.

Early learning

There has been a significant uptick in calls to ACD's Support Line about early learning since 2019. Families called most often about:

- Lack of reasonable adjustments and individualised funding support
- Reduced access to early learning, including enrolment being discouraged and children being put on decreased hours
- Poor transition to school support.

School

Issues with schools persist. Over a five-year period, two issues remain the biggest challenges for families calling ACD's Support Line:

- Lack of reasonable adjustments
- Access to school being discouraged – from enrolment to reduced hours.

Making education more inclusive

Victoria has a strong starting point to make early learning and school more inclusive. Significant investments in the Best Start, Best Life and Disability Inclusion reforms set the scene for a strengthened mainstream system. For example, the following initiatives and programs are a core component of making education inclusive:

- Preschool Field Officer program
- Disability Inclusion reforms (tier 3 and some of tier 2)
- Specialist Support Services
- Visiting Teachers
- Peer support for autistic students (I Can Network)
- Student and family focused disability advocacy.

Strengthening universal services

A number of important reforms have been identified to increase inclusion in mainstream education, including:

- Expanded Kindergarten Inclusion Support. Currently, eligibility is too narrow meaning too many children miss out on the support they need to engage, and it can feel deficit-based for families.
- Strengthened system accountability and oversight as recommended by the Disability Royal Commission.