



Foundational Supports and the Disability Ecosystem for Children with Developmental Concerns, Delays, Differences and Disabilities

Principles, Best Practices and Solutions

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Executive Summary

Early childhood intervention delivers supports that are designed to equip parents and primary caregivers with the skills and knowledge to help children develop and use functional abilities, ensuring their meaningful participation in key environments throughout their lives. This is the building block which lays the foundation for positive life outcomes across all domains.

This paper explores foundational supports within this context, drawing from the experience of the Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network (ECIBPN).

Our mission-driven organisations have been delivering a continuum of foundational supports to children and their families in our local areas to meet local needs, for many decades.

As established and trusted community-based notfor-profit child and family organisations, we believe that we have much to contribute to the upcoming discussions on co-designing the foundational supports and disability support ecosystem for children and families. This white paper summarises:

- The principles fundamental to a new supports ecosystem including examples of past and present practices that exemplify these principles.
- The potential to integrate foundational supports into the existing service ecosystem.
- The role of Navigators and Lead Practitioners (Key Workers).
- How community-based child and family organisations play a crucial role in the broader child and family sector as accessible, localised points of support bridging universal and targeted services. We also address the ways in which conflicts of interest can be managed within these frameworks.

The paper emphasises the need for a distinct model of foundational and disability supports for children under the age of 16, based on best practices in early childhood intervention and tailored to the ages and stages of the child. This model recognises how critical the first five years of a child's life are for development.

All programs and services should be community-based, promoting inclusion by focusing on the child within the context of their family and community, and ensuring culturally appropriate support for diverse backgrounds. Coordination and collaboration of education, health and social services is essential to ease navigation for families. Peer-led support groups and place-based, local services provide practical and emotional support, prioritising equity for all children and families.

The paper emphasises the need for a distinct model of foundational and disability supports for children under the age of 16, based on best practices in early childhood intervention and tailored to the ages and stages of the child. This model recognises how the critical first five years of a child's life are for development.

In developing a comprehensive and effective foundational support ecosystem, we believe the following principles should guide its design:

- 1. Best Practices in Early Childhood Intervention: Ensure that all foundational supports are grounded in proven best practices specific to early childhood intervention.
- **2. Promotion of Inclusion:** All foundational supports should actively promote inclusion, ensuring that all children and families, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, feel welcomed and supported.
- **3. Effective Support Systems:** Implement support systems that are robust, reliable, and capable of effectively addressing the diverse needs of children with disabilities and their families.
- **4. Promotion of Collaboration:** Design the support ecosystem around principles of collaboration, encouraging partnership between families, professionals, and community organisations to maximise the benefits of available resources.
- **5. Fair and Equitable Access:** Ensure that foundational supports are accessible to all children and families in a fair and equitable manner, removing barriers to access and participation.
- **6. Sustainable Funding Models:** Develop funding models that sustain and strengthen the community sector, enabling it to provide enduring support and services to children with disabilities and their families.

This paper provides an initial mapping of the NSW service system already in place, highlighting that existing services should be integrated and adapted into the foundational supports ecosystem to better meet the needs of children and their families. It emphasises the critical importance that the Lead Practitioner (Key Worker) role serves in supporting children and families. We argue that this role should be offered as soon as developmental concerns are identified and should be a service families can procure with choice and control from locally trusted providers who work within the Best Practice Guidelines.

The ECIBPN is a key member of the Child and Family Supports Alliance, NSW (CaFSA). This Alliance is a collaborative body of leaders from NSW's mainstream and specialist community-based and not-for-profit sectors, including national parenting support. CaFSA has published a discussion paper: Principles for Developing a NSW Foundational Supports System for Children with Developmental Differences, Delays, or Disabilities, and Their Families. The CaFSA position paper provides high level principles that must feature in a foundational supports ecosystem.

This ECIBPN white paper expands on the CaFSA discussion paper from the perspective of existing child and family organisations who also deliver early childhood intervention supports. This paper identifies and explains critical principles of an equitable foundational and disability support ecosystem and recommends strengthening the role of community-based organisations as part of the future ecosystem.

DUR PERSPECTIVE

About the Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Network

This white paper has been prepared by a network of 19 not-for-profit child and family organisations that provide early childhood intervention services and/or early childhood education with an average of 55 years of experience. Together, we support over 6,000 children in early childhood intervention under the NDIS and over 22,000 children and young people and their families annually in metropolitan and regional areas. While we primarily operate across NSW, we also have representation in Victoria and the ACT.

Our network members have long standing experience in the early childhood intervention sector through the former Early Childhood Intervention Association NSW/ACT Chapter. In 2021, we united again to advance best practice models under the NDIS leading us to sector reform advocacy starting with the NDIS Early Childhood Reset. In 2023, we formalised our network through the development of a governance structure and Terms of Reference. At the time of formation, we had 14 providers. The purpose of the current group is to collectively advocate as not-for-profit providers for high quality, evidence-based early childhood intervention to support children and young people 0-16 years old in Australia. Since our formation in 2023, our membership has grown to 19 organisations that meet fortnightly to:

- share collective experience within the sector with a solutions-focused approach;
- work together to understand the reform context and form a united view regarding impacts and opportunities;
- pursue an advocacy agenda that promotes best practice interventions, access and equity for children and young people with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities and their families.

We have a shared vision that all children and young people should have access to best practice intervention within a community context. We seek a policy and operational environment that promotes this vision.

The paper is intended to inform policy-makers and decision-makers regarding observations 'on the ground' from the community-based not-for-profit perspective, primarily in NSW. These observations are made from our direct, collective, and extensive history in supporting children and families in the community. The paper summarises our recommendations and outlines possible solutions to constructively contribute toward shaping a future service system that is aligned to the 'Best Practice Guidelines' in Early Childhood Intervention.

We are keen to consult and collaborate with other key stakeholders in the design of foundational supports and other disability supports, including families and those with lived experiences more broadly. Our intention with this paper is to put forward information and possibilities which will serve as a platform for consideration, review, consultation, and solutions-thinking.

Introduction

Background

We have developed this white paper in the context of the recommendations in the NDIS Review Final Report and the National Early Years Strategy, as well as, the positive initiatives at both federal and state levels aimed at reviewing and improving the experience of children with developmental concerns, delays, differences and disabilities and their families.

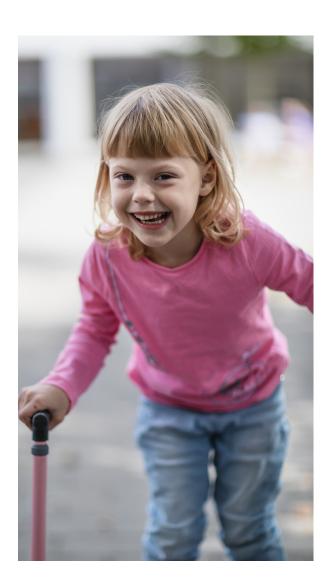
These reviews and early years strategies have come at a time of great need.

Despite the best of intentions in the design of the current service system, it has failed to meet the needs of many children and families.

As trusted and experienced not-for-profit community-based organisations, we have been collectively observing:

- That families find the current system confusing and expensive, and this creates barriers to access;
- That families feel isolated with regard to supports;
- That children are missing out on early intervention during their most critical phase of development;
- That the current system is deficit-focused, instead of strengths-based;
- That the current system encourages a medical model of disability, instead of a social model of disability – this leads to overservicing and dependence, rather than capacity building and confidence;
- That generally the design of the NDIS is participant and adult-focused, and fails to understand and appropriately support children and families.

We welcome the recommendations of the NDIS Review's Final Report and Early Years Strategy which focus on inclusion and access to supports for all families. Ensuring that children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities and their families receive timely and appropriate supports matching their needs is critical. Improving their access and experience with the support ecosystem requires acknowledging the unique needs of children and families, which differ significantly from those of adults.



A Brighter Future for Children and Families

We envisage a future for Australia's children and families in which all families receive proactive support, starting in the antenatal period. This support would come from locally responsive community-based services that continue to assist families throughout their parenting journey. These services would optimise family capacity and help families navigate the system and support their child with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities.

This integrated service model would provide a seamless family experience through trusted community partners who provide place-based services that are responsive to local community needs and trends. Families would receive help in building their parenting capacity and responding to emerging concerns promptly. These services would work closely with and be integrated into systems that parents already access, such as local community activities, playgroups, early childhood education, and local health services, and would connect them with broader supports and networks for additional support. Those broader supports would include Key Workers and early childhood intervention which is aligned to best practice. Access to these supports early and without barriers is essential to positive outcomes.

The positive outcomes of such a system include:

- Children's developmental concerns being addressed early, reducing the ongoing intervention requirements and improving outcomes across all domains.
- Strong parent and family wellbeing and resilience.
- Parent and carer confidence.
- Healthy and thriving children and families.

In this paper, we discuss the principles required to develop the foundational support and disability ecosystem for children and families, provide examples of existing practices, outline the role of early childhood intervention providers, and map some existing service systems in NSW that could be adapted to better fit the needs of families.

The Uniqueness of Childhood

Early childhood is a highly unique period. The first five years of a child's life is when 90% of their brain develops; as such, it is a critical developmental window for intervention. It is essential that children receive timely support during this period to ensure effective long-term outcomes.

As children grow beyond these early years, they continue to undergo significant development, necessitating regular review and adaptation of their needs. Unlike adulthood, where needs generally become more consistent, childhood is characterised by ongoing and evolving development.

Children also exist within the context of their families and education systems, and they are heavily influenced and dependent on these environments.

Therefore, it is crucial to provide support to caregivers to build their capacity and capability to support their children. This support should be regular to respond to the evolving needs at each age and stage of the child. Family support must focus on building capabilities and confidence, ensuring caregivers can cope well with life's demands and have their core needs met to effectively support their children.

Core Principles for the Foundational Supports and Disability Ecosystem for Children and Families



In April 2016, the *Best Practice in Early Childhood Early Intervention Guidelines*¹ (henceforth, 'Best Practice Guidelines') were released after two years of consultation with Australian early childhood intervention service providers, the community, researchers and the government. The development of these guidelines was funded by the Commonwealth Government through the NDIS Sector Development Fund. A review of these guidelines is scheduled to commence in 2024.

We believe that the Best Practice Guidelines should be incorporated into all service design for childhood supports.

What this looks like:

 We ensure that all Australian children and families receive evidence-based supports that deliver outcomes.

KEY TAKE AWAYS:

Evidence-based guidelines for best practices in early childhood intervention (2016) are endorsed by the NDIA.

Service models should incorporate these guidelines.

The four pillars of quality best practice are: Family, Inclusion, Teamwork, and Universal Principles.

Adhering to these principles benefits families and the government, producing better outcomes at lower costs.

- Supports are provided in a manner that effectively engages and supports families and children through respectful and collaborative relationships.
- Families and other parts of the service system have their capacity developed to better support children effectively on an ongoing basis.
- Families have a consistent experience regardless of the service provider.
- The work of each provider complements others.
- Service providers work toward similar goals, such as 'inclusive participatory practice.'

https://https://www.flipsnack.com/earlychildhoodintervention/ecia-national-guidelines-best-practice-in-eci/full-view.html

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES - FOUR PILLARS

QUALITY AREA 1: FAMILY

- Family-centred and Strengths-based Practice
- Culturally Responsive Practice

QUALITY AREA: INCLUSION

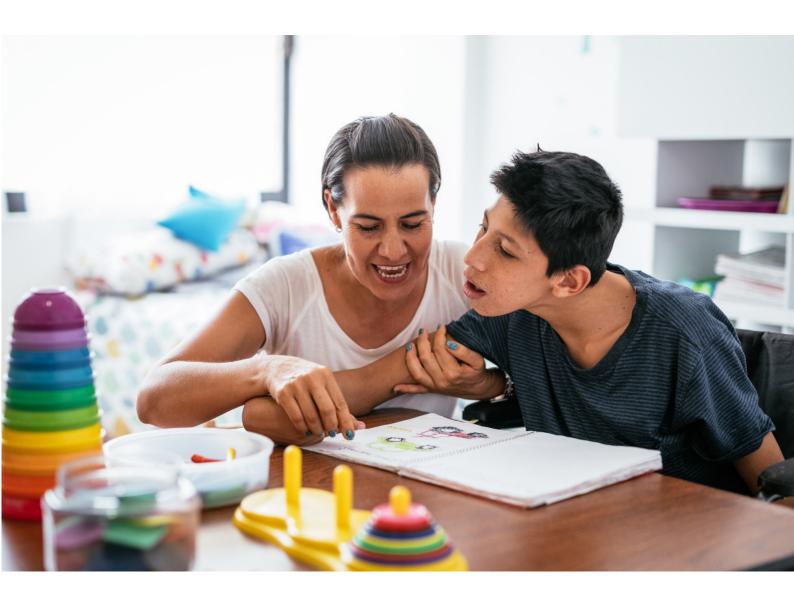
- Inclusive Participatory <u>Practi</u>ce
- Engaging the Child in Natural Environments

QUALITY AREA 3: TEAM WORK

- Collaborative Teamwork Practice
- Capacity-Building Practice

QUALITY AREA 4: UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES

Evidence Base, Standards,Accountability and PracticeOutcomes-basedApproach



WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE TO INCORPORATE THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES INTO SERVICE DESIGN AND POLICY:

- Where children live, play, learn: Recognising that children learn and develop best in everyday settings such as home, childcare, and preschool, where they interact with family and friends.
- Parent and Caregiver Development: Providing information, tools, and support to equip parents and caregivers, enabling them to meet the child's long-term needs.
- Educator and Professional Development: Benefiting all children by building the capacity of educators and other professionals.
- **Inclusion:** Ensuring children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities have the same opportunities as all children to develop friendships, interact with others, and be part of their community.
- Positive Attitudes: Fostering inclusive environments that build positive societal attitudes for future generations.
- **Research-Based Practices:** Incorporating broad early childhood intervention research and evidence related to specific diagnoses.
- **Key Worker Model:** Reducing the number of specialists required to support families, focusing on meaningful engagement with one professional at the right time for the right outcome.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Aligning practices with the needs of different cultures and nationalities, being sensitive and adaptable to family needs.
- **Return on Investment:** By adopting best practices, the government will see improved outcomes and families will receive more appropriate and sensitive supports.

By adopting the Best Practice Guidelines, the government will see an improved return on investment as outcomes will be more likely to be achieved. Additionally, families will receive more appropriate and sensitive supports which meet their needs.

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2. All Foundational Supports Should Promote Inclusion

WHY INCLUSION IS IMPORTANT

Inclusion allows every child to have the similar experiences and opportunities, leading to better outcomes for individuals and communities. It supports individuals to feel connected in their communities and feel valued as a member of society. For children and their families, inclusion in their local community leads to the following positive outcomes:

- The child's health, development and wellbeing are enhanced.
- Families feel supported in their role as parents and/or carers.
- When children are included in everyday experiences, better developmental outcomes follow.
- Inclusion in everyday experiences, education, and community activities, improves family outcomes.
- Inclusion is an important preventative approach whilst also ensure the rights of the child are upheld.

KEY TAKE AWAYS:

Children are integral parts of their families, communities, and education systems.

Programs and services must support the whole system around the child, not just the child alone.

With appropriate supports, children can participate in mainstream educational and community settings, benefiting all involved.

Programs, services, and supports must be culturally appropriate and embedded in community and educational systems.

CHILDREN ARE A PART OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

Children are inherently reliant on their families and caregivers for support. As such, they exist as part of a system and support must wrap around all those who support a child. This includes their immediate family, other caregivers, educational settings, and communities in which they interact to learn and play. This also includes mainstream services such as playgrounds, libraries, sport and recreation, etc.

- Programs and services must be based on the ecological approach that views the child within the context of their family and community; this is also known as the social model of disability.
- This model emphasises the social aspects of disability. It focuses on removing barriers
 to inclusion and participation where a child socialises, such as educational systems and
 community, rather than focusing solely on intervention for the individual child. If we only focus
 on the child, we fail to enable their inclusion.
- A different model of foundational supports for children is needed compared to adults, especially for those aged 0-9 years who are in the earliest and most rapid stages of development.

FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORTS SHOULD BE EMBEDDED IN COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS

Community programs include all of the places children live, learn and play, such as local parks, playgrounds, sport and recreation activities, libraries, and health facilities. Meeting children and families where they are already spending their time reduces barriers to participation, and also upskills and develops those community programs to better meet the needs of those children and their families.

- Programs and services are embedded within the community and support access to inclusive
 activities, helping children with disabilities feel connected to their surroundings through social,
 recreational activities, art, community, and sporting activities.
- Examples include:
 - support embedded into playgroups in parks;
 - access to specialists at local community centres such as libraries;
 - accessible locations such as co-located services or service hubs;
 - capacity building for local community services including sport and recreation; and
 - capacity building and guidelines for playground development to make this more inclusive.



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Nearly 50% of one year olds and approximately 90% of four year olds are enrolled in early childhood education.² By age six, most are typically all enrolled in formal schooling. They spend at least 30 hours a week in primary and secondary school settings and as such, they are an important setting which must be considered with regards to the implementation of foundational supports.

What this looks like:

- Rethink the way support is provided to children in schools to support strengths-based approaches.
- In early childhood education, ensure that schools are equipped to recognise and support children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities.
- Equip early childhood education settings and schools to include children with developmental delays or disabilities by providing specialised learning adaptations and promoting social integration and peer learning in mainstream settings.
- Ensure children are able to access early childhood supports and intervention in their educational settings to ensure interventions are tailored to supporting them to participate in curriculum and classroom life.
- Support educational staff with the tools and resources to support children with diverse learning needs including developmental concerns, delays and disabilities.
- Develop environmental guidelines which promote inclusive environments that go beyond mobility requirements and address other needs such as sensory input. Support educational settings to implement these.
- Reduce barriers for schools which impede early childhood intervention being delivered in school by reviewing the funding model for early childhood intervention and therapeutic supports for children under the age of 16.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR FUNDING EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION AND THERAPEUTIC SUPPORTS IN SCHOOLS

Commission a small panel of local early childhood intervention providers who work under best practice principles. Families can choose which provider they wish to use, but this will reduce the volume of providers working in schools, reducing administration and leading to more meaningful engagement.

- Panels would be determined on a geographic basis to encourage smooth transition between early childhood education and school settings.
- Each panel would have one lead provider which will provide:
 - a. General consultation with the school regarding themes and development needs;
 - b. Targeted training and development for the workforce;
 - c. Advice regarding creating inclusive environments and creating inclusive curriculum.

All providers in the panel will provide early childhood intervention and therapeutic support in the centre or school under a Key Worker model. They will work under consistent frameworks; however, having multiple providers enables choice and control for families. Families may purchase these services via the NDIS, and if they are not eligible, there should be other funding to support access to these services.

The same providers may also provide supports in the home environment, in alignment with best practices, but this will be at the families' discretion.

There have been successful models like this used and evaluated in NSW. Please contact us for further information.

² Australian Government Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care - Draft report*, 2023, page 2.

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SERVICES

Culturally appropriate services are essential to ensure that all children and their families, regardless of their background, feel understood, respected, and supported. Foundational supports should be designed to ensure equitable access for the broadest range of children and families, considering their diverse cultural, linguistic, and social contexts.

What this looks like:

- Ensure that support practices are culturally relevant and appropriate for people from diverse backgrounds, including culturally and linguistically diverse communities, First Nations families, and other groups such as the LGBTIQ+ community.
- Employ diverse staff groups that reflect the communities they serve.
- Incorporate cultural competency training for all staff members.
- Engage community and families in codesign where appropriate.
- Provide multilingual resources and translations services to ensure accessibility.
- Implement flexible service delivery models to accommodate cultural practices and preferences.

3. Implement Effective Support Systems

PROACTIVE AND PREVENTATIVE SUPPORTS

Proactive and preventative supports are essential for fostering optimal development and addressing potential concerns early. Focusing on prevention significantly improves outcomes for children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities and their families.

What this looks like:

 Providing antenatal education to families regarding development and where to go for help.

KEY TAKE AWAYS:

Supports should be preventative, family-centred, place-based and peer-led where possible.

Supports should enable early intervention as soon as possible in a manner that aligns to the Best Practice Guidelines.

Supports should provide families with continuity of care.

- Developing relationships during the antenatal period to increase uptake and connection with services postpartum.
- Ensuring easily accessible information is available to families.
- Offering more easily accessible developmental education for all families through mainstream programs such as supported playgroups to help encourage development. For instance, educating families on the importance of a well-balanced diet, as malnutrition can affect development.

FAMILIES ACCESS EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS WHEN NEEDED

Due to the rapid development of a child's brain during the first five years of a child's life, it is essential that services are delivered as early as practicable and in a manner that is tailored to the age and stage of the child, and their presenting need. It is critical families get access to supports by the right person, at the right time, for the right outcomes.

What this looks like:

- Ensure families are educated regarding developmental milestones through easily accessible information to help them recognise when to ask for help earlier.
- Ensure screening capabilities are implemented into mainstream services such as supported playgroups and early childhood education services.
- Implement supports that provide timely supports for children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities to improve developmental outcomes. These interventions should include parental capacity building, therapeutic services, educational programs, and support groups.
- Ensure supports include a continuum of universal to targeted approaches. These provide preventative and early intervention for children who may be at risk of developmental delay due to environmental factors and early childhood intervention for children with developmental delay or disabilities.
- Ensure families are not out-of-pocket for review of developmental concerns with qualified professionals.
- Ensure all families, regardless of visa status, are able to access these supports in the community.
- Ensure that referring providers eg maternal/ health nurses, paediatricians, GPs, have consistent and robust knowledge of processes and referral pathways.

FAMILY-CENTRED SERVICES

As a central component of best practices, family-centred services are crucial for ensuring the best outcomes for children. Children are integral to their families and dependent on their caregivers. Family-centred services aim to strengthen and connect families recognising their essential role in a child's development.

- Offering supports that recognise the family's role in a child's development, considering their needs in the child's support and including them as partners in decision-making processes.
- Working in ways that build family-capacity and support the greatest independence from service systems.
- Funding a 'Team Around the Child' or Key Worker approach. This includes educators, therapists, peer workers, and family support, to provide a continuum of support tailored to the family's needs, avoiding overwhelming them with multiple professionals all at once.
- Offering supports to families that promote their wellbeing, such as family and couple therapy
 to strengthen relationships, individual counselling and support, and family assistance to ensure
 other pressures that may negatively impact their wellbeing and capacity to support their
 children.

PLACE-BASED AND OUTREACH SERVICES

Services must be tailored to the local community, as communities have unique needs. Further, a local approach enables trust to be built, reducing barriers to engagement.

What this looks like:

- Recognise and use existing, trusted, experienced, community-based child and family organisations, which have been historically funded to deliver a continuum of foundational supports tailored to local needs.
- Ensuring services include wide-ranging referral pathways, including self-referral, and are
 provided in naturally occurring community places by skilled staff with access to quality training
 and supervision.
- There is a no-wrong-door approach which is particularly vital for supporting children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities and their families, especially including those who are not eligible for NDIS.
- Ensuring strengths-based, family-centred organisations experienced with families of young children are funded and part of the continuum of the foundational supports ecosystem.
- There is no one-size-fits-all model; each community should develop connections based on their unique needs and resources. These networks are not random but have strength and permanence through their connections.

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS

Peer support groups and peer workers foster a sense of community, understanding and support among families. They reduce barriers to engagement by ensuring families feel understood and connected to broader supports. These groups, particularly when peer-led, are instrumental in helping families and siblings navigate the journey of supporting their child or sibling's development.

- Establishing peer support groups that provide emotional and practical support to families and siblings.
- Encouraging peer-led initiatives to build a sense of community and shared understanding.
- Facilitating connections between families to create a supportive network.
- Providing resources and training to peer leaders to enhance the effectiveness of these groups.
- Strengthen and fund family-centred organisations to build capacity through family-leadership approaches.
- Build connections between peer-led family-centred organisations and other parts of the foundational supports ecosystem.
- Supporting siblings, in addition to parents/carers.

CONTINUITY OF CARE

It is essential that families, once they have established trusted relationships, can continue their journey with a provider, should they choose. Families frequently provide this feedback to our services that they would prefer a 'one stop shop' and continuity of their care. As such, it is important that foundational support providers are not restricted from providing NDIS services.

What this looks like:

- Early childhood intervention providers delivering short term intervention and support to families with developmental concerns as part of foundational supports, may also provide early childhood intervention under the NDIS. If a child's original developmental concerns progress to a diagnosis and access to the NDIS is provided, this enables the family to continue with their supports with the same provider.
- Conflicts of interests are managed by community-based organisations who have robust governance mechanisms in place. See page 27 for further disucssion on managing conflicts of interest.

4. Collaboration and Co-Design Must Be Central

AN INTEGRATED ECOSYSTEM OF FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORTS

Achieving the best outcomes for families requires a collaborative approach between professionals and families. The service system in the foundational supports ecosystem must be designed to facilitate and promote this collaboration effectively.

What this looks like:

 Collaboration is an expected and funded activity to reduce fragmentation and ensure coordinated access to necessary education, health, and social services.

KEY TAKE AWAYS:

Funding for foundational supports must enable collaboration.

Infrastructure is required to enable seamless information share and reduce bureaucracies.

- Navigation options for families include online service directories, phone resources, peer-to-peer navigation, and Key Workers.
- Co-design with families is a principle in the design and implementation of support programs.
- Integrated hubs can be a suitable model in some communities, providing opportunities for professionals to engage in outreach work. Key considerations include:
 - **Local Facilitation:** Hubs should be managed by experienced, local, professional not-for-profit providers who have established trust within the community.
 - Types of Hubs:
 - > Physical Hubs: In some regions, a physical hub may be necessary.
 - > Connected Hubs: In other regions, hubs can function through strong interagency connections, providing the benefits of an integrated hub model, without the need for a physical structure.

- **Feasibility and Purpose:** Not every local area can financially support an integrated hub. The goal is to reduce silos and create seamless support for families.
- Alternative and Diverse Models: An integrated, interconnected community network can serve as an alternative to a physical integrated hub, creating a web of support that meets the needs of families and their children. Examples include existing hubs that are established community-based organisations and hubs that operate on school grounds.

STRONG INTERAGENCY CONNECTION

Organisations delivering foundational supports need infrastructure to support collaboration and connection

What this looks like:

- Collaborative relationships between organisations within the foundational supports ecosystem facilitate warm referral, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and simplifying service navigation.
- Streamlined processes reduce duplication.
- Building robust community support systems and which and promotes continuity of care.
- Collaboration among various agencies leads to more comprehensive and effective family support programs.
- Coordinated care addresses multiple needs simultaneously and more effectively.
- Use of IT systems encourages knowledge sharing among professionals in the interagency.

COORDINATION WITHIN THE OTHER RELATED SECTORS

Effective support for children and families requires collaboration and coordination with a range of other key stakeholders outside the system of foundational supports.

- Sector-wide coordination and collaboration ensure services are comprehensive, seamless, and accessible.
- Stakeholders, including health providers, education systems, social services, mainstream community, and specialist child and family services work together to share resources, expertise, and data.
- An integrated approach helps eliminate service gaps and provides seamless pathways to support.
- Collaboration fosters a community of practice for disseminating and implementing best practices, enhancing the quality and impact of early childhood interventions.

Interagency Example:

The Early Childhood Intervention Coordination Program (ECICP) in NSW promoted interagency collaboration and dismantled silos between government and non-government agencies to improve support for children with developmental delay or disabilities and their families. Thirteen regions across the state received \$12,000 annually to support coordination efforts tailored to local needs.

Operating for over 20 years before the introduction of the NDIS, the program continues in some regions as local unfunded interagency initiatives. Community-based not-for-profit (NFP) organisations predominantly led these networks, ensuring stability through their extensive corporate knowledge, dedication to executing committee actions, and roles in governance, including treasurer positions and financial management of the annual committee funding. Interagency activities varied by region, addressing specific local needs through initiatives such as crossorganisational workshops to support families transitioning to school, strengthening local referral pathways, and addressing local training and workforce requirements.

5. Fair and Equitable Access

PRIORITISE EQUITY GROUPS

Equity groups have increased risk factors, making it essential to prioritise their access to services.

What this looks like:

- Prioritise support for children with developmental delays and disabilities, culturally diverse, Aboriginal, lowincome, at-risk, socially isolated families, and other vulnerable families, ensuring programs are adapted to meet their needs.
- Ensure locally-trusted outreach services actively seek out and engage with equity groups to reduce barriers to access.

KEY TAKE AWAYS:

Equity groups are at higher risk and require support as a priority.

Families' needs change over time and services must be flexible to meet evolving needs.

Services should be accessible regardless of visa status.

Service types should be available nationally to ensure all children get equal access; while being tailored to local environments and needs.

Example:

The NSW Department of Education has funded community-based organisations to deliver Start Strong Pathways services. These services aim to promote the value of early education and care to parents with children aged birth to 3 years and support them in enrolling their children into early education and care at age 4. This funding targets equity groups, recognising that these children face significant barriers to accessing early education. This program is a good example of a foundational support program which plays an important role for equity groups.

FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE SERVICES

Families' needs evolve and change over time and services must remain flexible to respond to the unique needs, as they evolve, for families.

What this looks like:

- Maintain broad and simple eligibility criteria and access processes, ensuring services are easy to enter, exit, and re-enter as required, and are not strictly time-limited.
- Ensure families are not restricted to access services based on their visa status. All families and children in the community must be eligible.
- Families use trusted, established, community-based organisations that provide a continuum of support and who are well connected through interagency collaboration when needed.

NATIONALLY CONSISTENT APPROACH

All children in Australia require equal access to supports. As such, a nationally consistent framework for service types and delivery is required. However, acknowledging local communities have local needs, the manner in which services are designed, operated and delivered should have flexibility.

- A clear national framework for the services and outcomes for foundational supports based on Best Practice Guidelines.
- Funding that enables adaptations at local levels to meet local needs.
- Build on the existing system strengths in each state and territory, recognising their unique historical environments and funding arrangements.

6. Funding Models Should Enable a Strong and Enduring Community Sector

MULTI-MODAL FUNDING STRUCTURES

Whilst the individual funding model has some merits, it has failed to recognise the variety of unfunded activities essential for collaboration and family support outside of individual service provision. Relying on the good will of organisations to deliver these services for free is unsustainable. It is essential that these components are recognised and funded appropriately. A funding model for foundational supports must include elements of block funding to ensure the sustainability of community organisations.

KEY TAKE AWAYS:

Funding models must account for the work that is not individually based through the provision of core (block) funding.

Funding models must allow for reinvestment, which promotes sustainability of organisations.

- Provide core (block) funding to local community providers of child and family supports that is designed to cover key areas which exist regardless of service volumes such as:
 - A no wrong door approach and ability to assist families to navigate the system.
 - Collaboration with other organisations.
 - Sector capacity building.
 - Staff professional development.
 - Marketing and communications which promote community awareness and education.
 - Quality practices and governance systems.
 - Technology requirements.
 - Stable and effective management.
 - Group programs that benefit the community as a whole.
 - Employment of a transdisciplinary team that meets the needs of the communities around baseline activities that are not individually dependent.
- Other components, including individual services for children and their families, may be funded on an individual basis, where appropriate.
- Identify and fill gaps in existing programs to ensure comprehensive Foundational Supports.
- Ensure community organisations have the financial flexibility to reinvest in services, promoting long-term sustainability and community benefit.

Integration of Foundational Supports into Existing Service Systems

There are gaps within the existing service system that need to be resolved to ensure families can access the full range of necessary supports in a timely and appropriate manner.

Many existing funded services within the community already form the infrastructure for foundational supports.

As such, developing a foundational supports ecosystem does not necessarily require significant additional funding, but rather re-design and enhancement of existing services to ensure that children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities, and their families, have their needs met. The sector could collaboratively support re-design of these services.

Where newly funded services are required fill the gaps, these can be integrated to leverage existing services and capabilities of the community sector, including early childhood intervention providers who are embedded in their communities and work in alignment with Best Practice Guidelines.



Developing a foundational supports ecosystem does not necessarily require significant additional funding, but rather re-design and enhancement of existing services to ensure that children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities, and their families, have their needs met.

Examples of existing supports delivered by community-based not-for-profit organisations which could be adapted to fulfil the requirements of foundational supports:



Supported playgroups: serve as vital soft-entry points for families, offering a seamless pathway to accessing various support services available within our organisations and in the broader mainstream community. Families can transition between different light-touch services as needed, receiving tailored support to Playgroup meet their evolving needs



Parenting courses and workshops: build family capacity to support their child, provide valuable learning and networking opportunities for all families. These sessions cover topics such as peer support, child development and parenting, Workshops empowering families and enhancing their knowledge and skills over time.



Peer support services: connect parents, caregivers and siblings; fostering a sense of understanding and belonging centred around common experiences. This develops support networks and improves personal wellbeing.



Screening

Developmental screening and assessment: help to identify developmental concerns, provide education regarding support pathways, provide assessment and referral where required.



Early childhood intervention: direct intervention with children based on best practices and capacity building for parents.



Supports

Navigation supports: all of our Network members provide free services to families to help them navigate the service system, including advice on developmental concerns, how to seek assessment and access the early childhood partners, parental capacity building with immediate strategies to support development, and advice regarding requirement for the NDIS.



Sector Capacity Building: these services are funded through the Department of Education for the development of early childhood and school educators.

These services integrate with other mainstream and foundational supports delivered by government providers that includes:

- Child development checks: delivered by NSW Community Health to review children at key milestones.
- Inclusion support: delivered at state and national levels to support the inclusion of children with developmental delays or disabilities in early childhood education and care settings.

In Appendices A and B we have mapped some of these state and federally funded services, through our NSW lens. This mapping serves as a starting point for conversations about the future foundational support service system and how it can be adapted by enhancing existing services. By working together, we can reduce fragmentation, identify gaps in service, knowledge, and skills and assist the government to implement foundational supports in a cost-effective manner that benefits children and families.

These services provide a foundation for further mapping and adaptation, paving the way for a review of the gaps and the addition of new services as required.

As trusted community-based not-for-profit organisations, we are committed to collaborating for the benefit of our communities. A transitional approach acknowledges the current resources available in NSW and co-designs the next steps to fill in any gaps. This method allows time to evaluate what is already available rather than creating new systems entirely.

Roles of Navigators and Lead Practitioners (Key Workers)



Children and their families have different requirements compared to adults with disabilities. While adults may prefer the separation of services from navigation, families of children need seamless services to ensure consistency. Adult needs are relatively static, whereas children are in a period of rapid development with evolving needs. Involving too many individuals can be ineffective, overwhelming, and become a barrier to engagement.

This is why we advocate for the provision of a Lead Practitioner (or Key Worker) role instead of a separate Navigator role for all families of children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities. The term 'Key Worker' is preferred within the early childhood intervention field. The Early Childhood Partners in the Community model has demonstrated that a Navigation function is ineffective in early childhood. Based on this, and the evidence for the Key Worker model, we recommend that families of children with developmental concerns be provided the resources to engage a Key Worker instead of a Navigator. This Key Worker service should be procured from trusted, locally-based community organisations working within the Best Practice Guidelines. The provision of a Key Worker at this early phase will enable continuity for a family throughout their early childhood intervention journey and negate the need for a separate 'Navigator' role.

WE ENVISAGE THE FOLLOWING LEVELS OF SUPPORT:

- Support for All Families Publicly available resources: Navigation should be a continuum beginning with resources to help families navigate the system independently where possible including:
 - Online tools and resources
 - A 'help desk' function
 - A call centre or chat function online
 - Connection to mainstream community services
 - Connection to parent-peer led services and organisations
 - Knowledge of professionals they will interact with, such as GPs, Child and Family Health

• Support for Families with Developmental Concerns - Key Worker Role: When developmental concerns are identified, a family should be provided with a Key Worker based in a trusted local community-based child and family organisation, rather than a Navigator. This approach ensures seamless service delivery and reduces fragmentation. The Key Worker role traditionally includes navigation (see illustration) as one of its functions, offering a personal, continuous connection highly valued by parents of young children. In addition, the Key Worker liaises with the other specialist allied health professionals and works with the family to implement those strategies between sessions. The Key Worker and other allied health professionals work as a 'Team Around the Child' through transdisciplinary practice, which means that each profession supports the other in their work with the family. This model is well evidenced and efficacious.

The Key Worker model should be structured as follows:

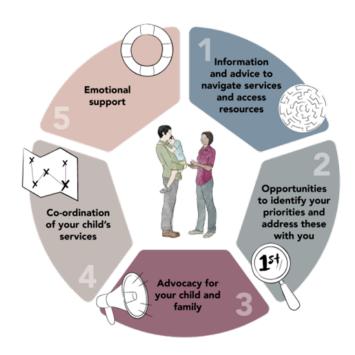
- Early Access and Inclusion: Key Workers should be introduced as soon as developmental concerns are identified, reducing costs and improving outcomes by providing timely support and linking families to community resources, fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion.
- **Continuity:** The Key Worker who commences with a family during the foundational support stage should have the capacity to continue supporting the family if the family later receives NDIS funding.
- Non-NDIA Employed: Key Workers should not be directly employed by the NDIA to avoid perceived biases and retain connection to community rather than a disability sector. Further, this enables them to deliver a full service of early childhood intervention to the families.
- Choice and Control: Families should have multiple providers to choose their Key Worker from where possible. The providers should collaborate with one another to deliver best outcomes for families at a regional level.
- Training: Providers and staff must be trained and accredited in the Best Practice Guidelines to ensure a true Key Worker model. Key Workers can be early childhood teachers, social workers or allied health professionals, provided they have the appropriate training and expertise on the delivery of the model.



BENEFITS OF THE KEY WORKER MODEL:

The Key Worker Model:

- Reduces the number of professionals involved, improving outcomes for children and families.
- Links families into their local communities fostering inclusion.
- Alleviates wait times for children and families.
- Reduces the cost burden on the NDIS system as early childhood intervention is less dependent on specialist allied health professionals.
- Reduces workforce shortages by alleviating dependence of specialist allied health professionals.
- Reduces over servicing for families.



llustration: Functions of a Key Worker (Used with permission from Plumtree Children's Services)

Example:

Florida Early Steps is provided by 15 organisations funded by the U.S. government to support children from birth to 36 months in their natural environments where they live, learn, and play. Early Steps offers a range of services, including:

- Service coordination
- Individual family service planning
- Connection to a family support specialist (parent-peer worker)
- Specialist therapy and education services

A transdisciplinary team supports the primary provider (Key Worker), who acts as the main point of contact for the family. The entire team is available to support the family as needed, ensuring comprehensive and coordinated care.

The Role of Community-Based Child and Family Organisations in the Foundational Supports and Disability Support Ecosystem



Existing community-based child and family organisations that also provide early intervention services play a crucial role in the broader child and family sector by acting as accessible, localised points of support that bridge universal and targeted services. By doing so the following benefits can be harnessed for the new foundational supports service system:

- We have a strong understanding of the Best Practice Guidelines for early childhood intervention and apply this to all aspects of the services that we provide. As such, we can deliver the Key Worker model and assist the government in developing guidelines for this.
 - A recent survey by Monash University found that 61.5% of allied health professionals surveyed felt 'unsure', 'unconfident' or 'extremely unconfident' to work as a Key Worker. Expertise of providers who have delivered this model for decades is required to develop the capacity of the sector.
- We are uniquely positioned to offer tailored, culturally sensitive interventions that meet the specific needs of their communities, ensuring that families receive appropriate support.
- We provide a seamless approach, collaborating with universal services, such as healthcare and education, as well as targeted services, like specialised therapy and support programs, to create an integrated network of care.
- We can do this because we have established connections with these networks. This ensures that
 families can easily navigate the system and receive comprehensive, continuous support while
 reducing service gaps.
- We foster strong connections within the community and with other service providers, to enhance the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of the child and family support ecosystem.
- We are trusted community-based, not-for-profit child and family organisations with 30 to 150 years of experience. Our mission and purpose are aligned with the needs of our communities, and we uphold strong governance systems.

³Klooger, A., Anderson, L., Luscombe, D., Ryan, MC., Health, S., Bhopti, *A. National Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Child-hood Intervention: Exploring ECI practitioner gaps in knowledge and barriers/enablers to implementation. Presentation at PRECI National Conference, May 2024.*

Managing Conflict of Interest in Service Delivery

We envisage a service system that enables continuity of care for families where local, not-for-profit child and family organisations deliver foundational supports and NDIS Supports creating a seamless customer journey for families and children which optimises outcomes.

We understand that this service system may raise concerns regarding conflicts of interest if we are delivering a range of foundational supports, Key Worker and other services outside of the NDIS, then continuing on to the delivery of NDIS services.

Effective management of conflicts of interest is essential to maintain trust and integrity within service delivery. As established community organisations, we have a history of working collaboratively to promote choice and control for families. For example, where possible in various regions, we ensure that more than one organisation offers services to provide diverse options to families.

Our Network of community-based organisations has been serving their regions for 30-150 years, establishing a strong track record of delivering child and family services with integrity and dedication to their missions. These organisations are guided by robust governance structures that help manage conflicts of interest ethically.

Many of our organisations have worked to deliver government funded services prior to the NDIS. The NSW Government would only fund organisations that were financially viable and had sound governance arrangements which could be demonstrated in their applications.

Strong interagency connections enhance our ability to deliver comprehensive and unbiased services. We regularly draw on our governance frameworks to navigate conflicts, ensuring that our service delivery remains transparent and trustworthy. Collaborative efforts among these organisations reinforce our commitment to ethical practices and mutual support.

By adhering to these principles, we ensure that our service delivery remains fair, ethical, and centred on the needs of children and families.

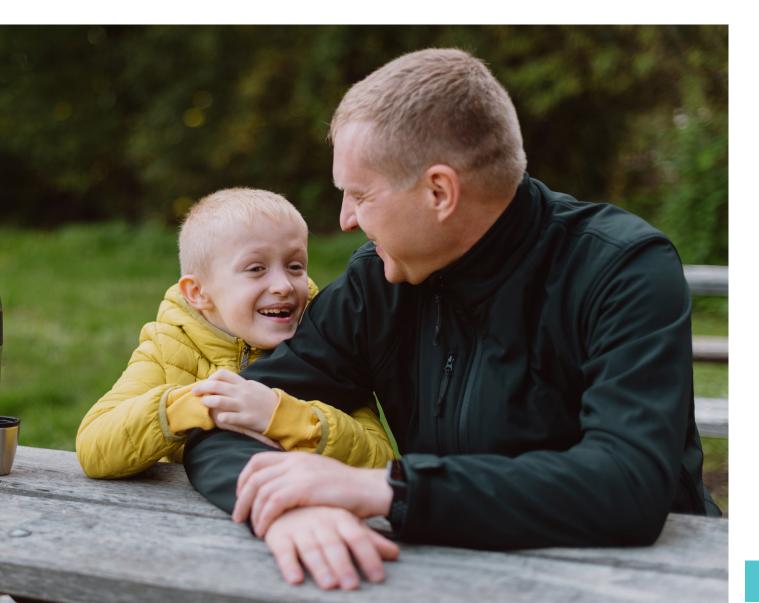
Example:

Conflict of interest is managed by NDIA Early Childhood Partner organisations, which are also registered providers of choice. Their governance practices satisfied the NDIA conflict of interest guidelines when the partner model was put out for tender. This establishes a precedent for established community-based organisations that are also registered providers, demonstrating our capability to maintain ethical standards while offering diverse and effective services to families.

Example:

The Early Links Program was funded by the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (ADHC) between 2015 and 2019. This program aimed to provide families with support during the early diagnosis period of their child's disability, focusing on helping families navigate the complex landscape of services, access appropriate resources, and receive necessary guidance to support their child's development. Local community-based organisations, funded to deliver this program, provided 6-8 sessions per family while also being funded to also deliver more substantial early intervention services to other families.

Providers of Early Links successfully supported families with both the Early Links sessions and more intensive individual services, ensuring only those who met the eligibility criteria for greater assistance had access to the intensive services. These organisations used their existing governance mechanisms to ensure fair, equitable, and ethical management of services. They effectively managed conflicts of interest by maintaining clear boundaries between the different types of services provided, ensuring transparency, and adhering to ethical standards that are consistent with their mission and purpose. The program was seamlessly integrated, locally focused, and connected families to community supports as needed.



Conclusion

We are excited that *NDIS Review Final Report* has highlighted the importance of childhood services within the disability services ecosystem, and called for reforms to enable improved access and experience for families and children. We are also excited to see the focus federally on the *National Early Years Strategy*.

The future envisaged with the introduction of foundational supports (and adaptation of existing services) and a reformed disability support ecosystem that is tailored to children with developmental concerns, delays, differences or disabilities will fill a significant gap for children and families.

We believe that development of these services can be achieved through existing funding and services, however, it is essential the core principles we discussed are integrated to achieve positive outcomes. Those include:

- 1. Foundational Supports Should be Based on Best Practices in Early Childhood Intervention
- 2. All Foundational Supports Should Promote Inclusion
- 3. Implement Effective Support Systems
- 4. Design Around Collaboration
- 5. Fair and Equitable Access to Foundational Supports
- 6. Funding Models Should Enable a Strong and Enduring Community Sector

We see ample opportunity to design the new foundational support and disability ecosystem by adapting existing services, and repurposing funding to fill gaps in the early years.

We are keen to work with policy-makers at all levels of government to collaborate on the development and design of this future support ecosystem. We believe strongly that our extensive history in this space, understanding of the Best Practice Guidelines, and community trust sets us apart in our expertise to contribute to both the design and delivery of foundational supports. We also value and acknowledge the important role of broader child and family community support providers, parents and children in the co-design process. We recommend engagement with the Child and Family Supports Alliance – NSW (CaFSA), as well as, similar alliances in other States and Territories.

We look forward to working with the sector and government on this next chapter.

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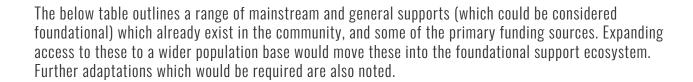
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Appendix A: Existing General Supports

- Mainstream/Foundational



Service Type	Example Funding Sources	Adaptations
PRENATAL AND POSTNATAL EDUCATIONAL COURSES	Parent funded (fee-for-service) Provided by local health districts	Include information about child development Include information about where to find support Offer free to families experiencing vulnerabilities
SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS	Department of Social Services Funding NSW Dept of Communities and Justice - Targeted Earlier Intervention Funding NSW Dept of Education - Start Strong Pathways Funding	Funding streams could combine to deliver playgroups with a variety of focuses including: - Education for parents; - Early education for children; - Parental support; - Informal developmental screening; - Information, linkages and referral; - Support to overcome barriers to early childhood education enrolments; - Child protection and family preservation.
PLAYGROUPS OFFERED By Private Providers	Parent-funded (fee for service)	These must be delivered by qualified educators or allied health practitioners with experience in child development. Sector development regarding inclusion to promote capacity building of these private providers.
INFORMATION PROVISION, REFERRAL AND LINKAGES	NSW Dept of Communities and Justice - Targeted Earlier Intervention Funding	Fund some local Interagencies focussed on children and young people but dependent on the funded provider in DCJ regions. Could be converted to consistent interagencies in each region.

Service Type	Example Funding Sources	Adaptations
PARENTING PROGRAMS	Department of Social Services Funding NSW Dept of Communities and Justice - Targeted Earlier Intervention Funding	Current ad hoc provision of programs such as those below could be more widely and consistently funded and provided by trained practitioners. Examples of universal parenting programs: - Triple P - Being a Parent - Tuning into Kids - Tuning into Teens - Circle of Security - MyTime - Grandparent programs - Stepping Stones Parenting programs for children with delay or disabilities: - Now and Next - Envisage
DEVELOPMENTAL SCREENING AND LIGHT TOUCH DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT	Local Health Districts Brighter Beginnings Funding	It is acknowledged that Child and Family Health Nurse clinics are also an important part of developmental screening during this age and the foundational support service system. We believe that this system would benefit from: - Utilisation of a 'team around the child' approach which utilises a diverse workforce which has early childhood development qualifications including early childhood teachers and paediatric allied health professionals. - Provision of screening and supports in natural settings to enable a more complete picture and reduce barriers to participation. - Being the primary provider of developmental checks due to extensive paediatric experience this requires. We acknowledge the important role of General Practitioners and suggest that they can refer to these clinics where screening identifies concerns which require further review. - A commissioning approach where developmental concerns are identified, families have the option to be given referral and funding to access early intervention from local providers under more specific foundational supports. For the Brighter Beginnings Program: This program needs to target a wider range of children (including earlier ages), children in small early childhood education centres, and children who are not attending early childhood education too. The program could be a follow up program from child and maternal health nurses and needs to incorporate support regarding the 'next steps' after screening outcomes.

Service Type	Example Funding Sources	Adaptations
INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FUNDING	https://idfm.org.au/funding-streams/ innovative-solutions	Innovative Solutions Support is one stream of funding available to eligible early childhood education and care services through the Inclusion Development Fund (IDF). It provides funding for flexible and tailored inclusion support that goes beyond the scope of support that can be provided by Inclusion Agencies. Delivered by qualified educators or allied health practitioners.
SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY CENTRES	https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching- and-learning/curriculum/early-learning/ schools-as-community-centres	An initiative supporting families in their local school community to enhance the early learning and wellbeing of children birth to 8 years. Enhance funding to ensure it is delivered by qualified educators or allied health practitioners with experience in child development. Ensure these are offered in all communities in need.
TOY LIBRARIES	Home Toy Libraries Australia: https://www.toylibraries.org.au/	Expand the number of toy libraries in NSW. Enhance funding to ensure they are delivered by qualified educators or allied health practitioners experience in child development.

Appendix B: Existing Supports - Specialised/Targeted



The below table outlines a range of more targeted supports which already exist in the community, and some of the primary funding sources. Expanding access to these to a wider population base would move these into the foundational support ecosystem and ensure families are not left behind. Further adaptations are also required and noted.

Service Type	Example Funding Sources	Adaptations
INDIVIDUAL EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION OR THERAPEUTIC SUPPORTS	Local Health Districts NDIA Individual Funding Packages NSW Dept of Communities and Justice	Local Health District funding is often 'in clinic' rather than in the community – services in natural settings are important for best outcomes.
PARENT CAPACITY BUILDING	Family Preservation and Targeted Earlier Intervention Funding	Adaptations are required to existing programs for families with specific needs e.g., Tuning into Kids for children with disabilities Provision of funding for evidence based programs such as Hanen ³

Service Type	Example Funding Sources	Adaptations
TRANSITION TO SCHOOL SUPPORTS	NDIA Individual Funding Packages NSW Dept of Education - Start Strong Pathways Funding	This is currently restricted to ad hoc community programs other funding streams. This requires special funding for all children, regardless of visa status.
PEER SUPPORT FOR PARENTS & SIBLINGS	ILC Funding	This funding is not reliable and makes ongoing service delivery difficult. This service could be provided by local community-based organisations.
FAMILY THERAPY TO SUPPORT STRONG PARENTAL RELATIONSHIPS	Medicare funding	Where individual psychologists will allow mental health care plans to be used for this purpose do allow parents to access this. However, one parent then does not have access to individual therapy. This should be a separate funding available for parents with children with developmental concerns, delays or disabilities through Medicare.
BROKERAGE FOR EQUIPMENT HIRE/ RESOURCE PURCHASE	Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program NSW Dept of Education Disability Inclusion Funding	Continue to fund this on a needs-application basis.
CAPACITY BUILDING FOR EARLY LEARNING CENTRES, SCHOOLS, GENERAL PRACTITIONERS, ETC	Commonwealth Inclusion Support Programme (Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care) NSW Disability Inclusion Funding (Preschools) NSW Sector Capacity Building (Preschools)	Attached to individual children so services where children not accessing do not access capacity building. No structured professional development.

³ https://www.hanen.org/

Network Members







































