CaFSA

Child and Family
Supports Alliance NSW

Submission to NSW Government Inquiry on Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales

April 2025

Introduction to CaFSA

The **Child and Family Supports Alliance NSW (CaFSA),** is a collaborative body of leaders from NSW's mainstream and specialist community-based and not-for-profit sectors, including national parenting support services. CaFSA was established to advocate for, design, and implement foundational supports systems tailored for children with developmental differences and their families.

On May 23, 2024, seventeen leaders met at a roundtable to discuss and shape the framework for Foundational Supports NSW and nationally, informed by recommendations from the NDIS Review. Attendees represented various community-based not-for-profit stakeholders including early childhood education and care providers, early childhood intervention organisations, peer-led groups, researchers, and mainstream child and family service providers. Collectively, our trusted and established organisations work with over 182,000 children and families, including children with disabilities, and many of us have a broader reach through consultancy and support work. Collectively our organisations have operated for an average of 40 years.

Our Vision

Our vision is for a sustainable, inclusive and adaptable child and family supports ecosystem in NSW that is child and family focused, informed by diverse voices, connected, evidence-based and accessible to all families whenever and wherever support is needed.

Introduction

CaFSA NSW thanks the members of the Inquiry for their consideration of our response.

We seek to advocate for, co-design, and support the enhancement and implementation of ecosystems, through informing and working with Government and other stakeholders, to enhance child development, and child and family wellbeing outcomes for all children 0-9 yrs in NSW.

We also seek to recognise and promote the importance of well-informed and well-supported families, communities and skilled service providers to achieve these outcomes.

The Alliance is committed to representing the voices of the diverse communities across NSW, including First Nations people, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, socio-economically disadvantaged, regional, rural and remote communities and LGBTQI+.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.

Key Principles for Foundational Supports Design

CaFSA recommends a system-wide approach to Foundational Supports for young children and their families that incorporates the following key principles:

1. **Utilisation of Existing NSW and National Services:** Recognise and leverage the deep experience and collaboration within the current service system to prevent duplication and fragmentation.
2. **Seamless Integration:** Ensure that Foundational Supports are seamlessly integrated into early childhood services, avoiding silos of support.
3. **Timely Early Intervention and Early Childhood Intervention:** Prioritise early intervention and early childhood intervention strategies and services, particularly focusing on the critical first 2,000 days of a child's life, to enhance developmental outcomes and build the capacity of families to support their children.
4. **Ease of Navigation and Accessibility:** Implement a community-based navigator role that is codesigned with CaFSA and other stakeholders to meet the unique needs of children and their families. This role will facilitate entry points and connections in trusted place-based community-based settings, simplifying the navigation process for families, particularly those deterred by the complexity of the existing NDIS systems that have been designed for adults.
5. **Peer and Parent-Led Initiatives:** Increase support for peer work and parent-led organisations, recognising the value of lived experience and direct family involvement in service design and delivery.
6. **Equitable Service Model:** Prioritise a state-based, block-funded not-for-profit service model that promotes collaborative place-based approaches, ensuring equitable access and integrating services across educational, health, and social sectors.

Summary of Recommendations

Supported Playgroups

- Additional funding is needed to ensure that supported playgroups are resourced to meet community demand.
- Funding needs to be allocated to support providers to provide navigation services for families.
- Recurrent sustainable funding for Supported Playgroups with longer Grant Agreements is needed.
- It is critical that funding enables professional staffing to support service integration.
- For parents from newly arrived multicultural backgrounds, adequate resources for information in language is also critical to the integration of families with other services.
- Funding to establish a supported playgroups knowledge hub
- Evidence-based programs and models of support to be funded and available to Supported Playgroups to maximise outcomes for children and families, including home visits for families who may benefit from additional support with research demonstrating the benefits

First 2000 Days – Brighter Beginnings

- Integrated Hubs in the first 2000 days can double early accurate identification of developmental needs and referrals, resulting in better outcomes.
- Adapting the 'First 2000 Days maternal and child healthcare framework' in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic by using digital technology has been shown to significantly improve the reach, parental engagement, and child and family outcomes, particularly for those from priority (e.g. regional, rural, and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, children living in socio-economic disadvantage, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities) backgrounds.
- Support the establishment and ongoing funding of Child and Family Hubs in NSW to improve attendance and engagement with developmental surveillance and integrate services and supports around families to intervene early
- Wraparound care for children and families with complex needs across multiple sectors, not just health, but also child and family welfare, social support, disability and parental mental health is essential.

- A national approach to support implementation, and training of Service Navigators and utilising e-Navigation tools e.g. "BARB", to assist families in navigating the wider health including parental mental health, infant and child mental health, social support systems, in addition to education systems.
- Expanding Brighter Beginnings Health Screenings to playgroups and other environments where families experiencing vulnerabilities would help to ensure earlier identification of needs.

Peer Support

- Peer support must be formally recognised as a legitimate form of early intervention and embedded within foundational supports—particularly for families who are not yet eligible for, or are navigating access to, the NDIS.
- Investment in independent, parent-led organisations is essential so that families can be referred for ongoing peer connection, leadership development, and community-based support.
- Peer-led programs must be free or low-cost and offered in accessible formats—including online, in-language, and culturally responsive delivery models—to reach diverse families and delivered within a model that draws on evidence-based approaches to enhance outcomes
- Improved integration of peer support with early childhood, health and disability services requires formal recognition of peer workers within service systems. This includes creating funded roles, clear referral pathways, and shared planning processes that include peer workers alongside professionals.

Early Childhood Intervention

- Universal access is required so no child misses out on early childhood intervention.
- A review of the NDIS Price Limits rates and the structure of funding is required. Noting, the Ability Roundtable has done some benchmarking in this space.
- Clear information in language from DoHAC and NDIS on this issue would be beneficial to ensure families awaiting visas do not delay diagnoses or supports for fear of impact on their visa or residency.
- Remove barriers to access schools and early learning centres for early childhood intervention and therapeutic support services. Barriers currently experienced are bans on entry, limited numbers of allied health disciplines allowed entry per child, cost to entry, block out Terms/weeks, entry only at a certain time of day, children being removed from classrooms for therapy

Response to Terms of Reference

We will respond to the Terms of Reference by highlighting the important role our organisations and services play with regard to foundational and disability supports available for children and young people in NSW.

Supported Playgroups

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

- Early Education (EarlyEd) Inc
- Ethnic Community Services (ECS)
- Early Connections – Manning and Great Lakes
- Firstchance- Little Ones Playgroups
- Karitane
- Koorana Child & Family Services Ltd
- KU Children's Services
- Noah's Inclusion Services
- Orana Early Childhood Intervention (OECI)
- Orange and District Early Education Program (ODEEP)
- Playgroup NSW
- Plumtree Children's Services
- SDN Children's Services
- Firstchance Ltd- Little Ones Playgroups

Description of the Service

- Supported playgroups are evidence-based models of play-based activities which offer parents support in early childhood development, parent capacity and community connection. While self-managed playgroups are a universal service model aimed at all families, supported playgroups are a more targeted service model for families with particular needs or vulnerabilities, such as trauma, mental health issues, social isolation, financial disadvantage, disability and/or developmental concerns (Williams et al, 2018).
- Some supported playgroups may be delivered to Aboriginal families, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including refugee families), or families where the parents are young (e.g., under 25 years old) (Williams, Berthelsen & Kenny, 2019).

- Supported playgroups aim to help children build the developmental foundations for successful transition to school, including self-regulation, social and communication skills, health and wellbeing (Williams, Berthelsen & Kenny, 2019). Supported playgroups also focus on increasing carers' knowledge of child development, parental responsiveness and engagement with their child through play and other home-based activities, and families' social connection and support (Commerford & Robinson 2017; Williams et al. 2018).
- These are typically held in parks and local community venues on a regular basis to enable families to attend regularly.
- Supported playgroups also differ from other playgroup models in that the facilitators hold qualifications in early childhood education or related fields and align their activities to the Early Years' Learning Framework and Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Guidelines. Further, staff are able to provide support to parents due to their experience.
- Variations exist on how and who playgroups are targeted for – some are open to all members of the community, others are delivered in language and culture, others are targeted for particular cohorts (e.g., children with Autism).

Family Eligibility

- Eligibility will vary based on funding source and target group for supported playgroups. Generally, however, these are free services available to members of the community regardless of visa status.

Funding Sources

- Funding sources vary for supported playgroups, are often for short time periods/non-recurrent and not all organisations are eligible to access through all pathways. Some examples include:
  - NSW Department of Communities and Justice – Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) Funding
  - NSW Department of Education – Start Strong Pathways Funding
  - Department of Social Services – Child and Parents Supports
  - National Indigenous Australians Agency – Aboriginal Playgroups
  - Australian Government Department of Education – Connected Beginnings
  - Philanthropy
  - Private and Community Donations

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- Supported playgroups are an informal yet evidence based learning environment, providing access to early learning for children who may not otherwise be engaged.
- Supported playgroups enable socialisation skills, along with the opportunity to enhance other areas of development through learning opportunities provided in the environment.
- Due to the professional nature of the staffing, children can be observed and parents provided with targeted support, coaching and education to support their own confidence and capacity for supporting their family. Other supports can be offered as required due to the staff members with strong community and developmental knowledge.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

- Additional funding is needed to ensure that supported playgroups are resourced to meet community demand. CaFSA members report that the number of families attending supported playgroups is increasing beyond their capacity, demonstrating increasing community need.
- Funding needs to be allocated to support providers to provide navigation services for families. Currently, funding is allocated to organisations to see families at the supported playgroup but not to follow them up comprehensively, nor to provide holistic level supports and navigation to other required services.
- Recurrent sustainable funding for Supported Playgroups with longer Grant Agreements is needed.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

- Supported playgroups often integrate with other services. For instance, they may connect with the local child and family health team to attend on a regular basis, or have other organisations join depending on the particular needs of the group. However, the degree to which this integration is possible is often dependent on the funding source and conditions.
- It is critical that that funding enables professional staffing to support service integration.
- For parents from newly arrived multicultural backgrounds, information in language is also critical to the integration of families with other services.

Case Study 1: Supported Playgroups

Background

In Term 1 of 2024, a family consisting of a mother (MO) and her two children, a 9-month-old and a 3-year-old, began attending our supported playgroup in the local park. MO, a fully qualified primary school teacher, was on maternity leave and planning to return to part-time work in Term 1, 2025.

At the time, MO presented as withdrawn, isolated, and under significant emotional strain. She did not drive, had limited support networks, and was experiencing pressure in her relationship.

Initial Presentation and Concerns

Upon initial attendance at the supported playgroup, MO demonstrated signs of emotional exhaustion and social isolation. Over the course of a few weeks, the Early Childhood Educator (ECE) facilitated a safe and consistent environment which enabled the development of trust and rapport with MO. Through ongoing conversations, the ECE became aware of MO's concerns regarding the development of her 3-year-old child.

MO disclosed struggles at home, particularly relating to child's sensory avoidance behaviours, including the child's resistance to bathing or showering, fussy eating habits, and avoidance of particular textures, smells, and tastes.

MO had previously consulted a private paediatrician who noted autism markers but advised observation over a 6–8 month period before proceeding with a formal diagnosis. The paediatrician had recommended private occupational therapy, which was financially inaccessible to the family. MO expressed feelings of confusion and helplessness regarding the lack of available support and guidance.

Emotional and Practical Support

Recognising MO's emotional distress and lack of support networks, the ECE provided time and space for MO to debrief and seek guidance. MO shared additional concerns about her 1-year-old child's disrupted sleep patterns and her husband's limited involvement in parenting and ongoing denial of the 3-year-old's developmental issues. Despite her professional background as a teacher, MO expressed feeling overwhelmed and unprepared to manage her own child's complex needs. She had not been informed about the possibility of NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) support without formal diagnosis.

Intervention and Referral
The ECE explained EACH and their referral process, EACH being our NDIS partner in the community who delivers Early Childhood Approach (ECA) services and, with MO's verbal consent, arranged for a family support worker to make a referral on behalf of the 3-year-old child at the beginning of Term 3, 2024.

Following the referral, EACH conducted an initial consultation with the family and guided them through the NDIS access request process. As a result, the child was granted a $15,000 NDIS package in Term 4, 2024, which enabled access to occupational therapy and speech therapy services to address developmental concerns.

Progress and Positive Outcomes
By Term 1 of 2025, the child had undergone a follow-up consultation with the private paediatrician and received a formal Autism diagnosis.

MO returned to the ECE for further advice on how to effectively manage and utilise the NDIS funding to best support her child. The ECE provided detailed information and facilitated a referral to Koorana's Request for Service for ongoing support coordination.

The family now attends supported playgroup sessions twice weekly. Both children have shown significant developmental progress, and MO has reported increased confidence and clarity in her parenting journey.

The connection with the supported playgroup and access to early intervention services has proven to be a turning point for the family.

Conclusion
This family's experience highlights the critical role of supported playgroups in providing not only developmental support for children but also emotional, informational, and referral support for parents.

In this instance, a chance encounter with a local supported playgroup evolved into a life-changing journey for a family navigating complex challenges.

Through the establishment of trust, timely intervention, and collaborative support, the family has experienced meaningful change and increased access to the resources they need to thrive.

Case Study 2: Supported Playgroups

Aja (Mother) and Zoya (child), both psuedonyms, moved from India to the regional town of Taree following Aja's employment at the local hospital, through a Community Connector program, aimed at sourcing nurses to regional areas in NSW.

This program allowed for the family to be supported in the workplace and with accommodation. Once settled Aja asked the Community Connector where she could meet other parents and children for Zoya to play with. She was advised of a facilitated playgroup run weekly at Early Connections – MGL in Taree.

Aja and Zola started attending the playgroup and after three weeks Aja started asking the staff (Early Childhood Teacher and Speech Pathologist) about her daughter's development, as she was concerned that she was, at two only saying a few words.

The staff were able to support Aja with information about developmental milestones and provided language stimulation activities and strategies over the following weeks.

After this, staff were able to support Aja in making contact with the local NDIS partner in making a referral for Zoya to apply for additional supports for her speech and language development as well as her gross motor development, which staff had also discussed with Aja. The family were also supported by staff to contact and visit a local childcare centre near their new home.

This facilitated playgroup was able to provide this family with a social network for both mother and child, and also access to experienced, skilled early intervention professionals, who were able to assist in supporting with:

- Parent education regarding developmental milestones,
- Immediate strategies and ideas, appropriate for child's needs,
- Referral assistance for NDIS supports,
- Ongoing supports and capacity building whilst awaiting NDIS supports,
- Support in accessing childcare with local staff knowledge.

First 2000 Days: Brighter Beginnings and Health Checks

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

- Karitane
- Koorana Child and Family Services Ltd
- Orange and District Early Education Program (ODEEP)
- Plumtree
- Playgroup NSW

Description of the service

- Karitane delivers parental support, education, research, and advice. supporting families to navigate parenting in the first 2,000 days of their child's life. Karitane services are evidence based and delivered by a caring and highly trained professional team of child and family health nurses, paediatricians, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists offering complete holistic care. to ensure that every child receives the best start in life. Provision of Residential and Virtual residential Parenting Service; Child and Family Day Stays for sleep, settling, feeding, breastfeeding and adjustment to parenting. Perinatal anxiety and depression and intervention for infant and child mental health including evidence based Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) for young children with clinically significant disruptive behaviours. During the first 2000 days of life, the brain is rapidly changing and growing. A child's environment and experiences during these early years have a lasting impact on their health, development, learning and wellbeing. This is because the growing brain changes to respond to the conditions around it, and these changes stick. Exposure to toxic stress during the first 2000 days of life can disrupt development and increase the risk of poor lifelong health. Exposure to risks like abuse and neglect, domestic violence, household mental illness and poverty lead to poorer health outcomes. The greater the number of stressors, the greater the risk to development. Protective factors can buffer the impact of stress including parent support programs, substance abuse treatment, high quality childcare, and income support for low-income families.
- Koorana, ODEEP, Plumtree: Brighter Beginnings screenings for development concerns are offered in our preschool environments for 3-5 year olds.
- Playgroup NSW: ASQ Trax early childhood health checks occurring in our playgroup settings for Aboriginal children and families who likely will not attend a mainstream hub, and we invite the local therapy services into our playgroup. In other community and supported playgroups for all children, we engage NSW Health and other allied health professionals. Our roaming play vans in Western Sydney are also an attractive option for CALD families who likely will not attend a hub but prefer place based playgroup settings.

Family eligibility

- Free to parents in the antenatal and up to aged 5 years. In Health Services, Medicare ineligible families, students on temporary visas may not be able to access certain services
- ·Funding Sources
- NSW Ministry of Health – Universal, secondary & tertiary services
- NSW Department of Communities and Justice – Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI)
- NSW Department of Education
- Australian Government Department of Education – Connected Beginnings

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

The importance of the First 2000 days (from pregnancy to start of school) for healthy brain development and later health and wellbeing has been acknowledged by the NSW (Brighter Beginnings) and Australian government.

Further, supporting this period of a child's life is a national policy and research priority to ensure that all children flourish .

However, approximately one-in-five Australian children start school with 'developmental vulnerability' leading to increased risk of poor socioemotional functioning, school difficulties, lifelong disability, chronic disease, mental illness, reduced economic opportunity, and intergenerational adversity.

The rate is higher at one-in-three to one-in-two for children from priority (multicultural, Aboriginal, low socioeconomic status, and regional/rural) groups. There is also significant inequity with children from disadvantaged backgrounds not engaging with recommended child developmental checks.

Thus, despite the significant investment in early child services through state and national programs, these are underused, with only 20-30% of families engaging with routine health and developmental services in some jurisdictions. Addressing this inequity in health service use and outcomes requires a fundamental shift to an integrated service model.

Refer also submission from Sydney Partnerships in Health Education Research and Enterprise (SPHERE), Sydney Health Partners, and the National Child and Family Hubs Network.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays and what's needed to improve integration with other services

- Integrated Hubs in the first 2000 days can double early accurate identification of developmental needs and referrals, resulting in better outcomes.
- Adapting the 'First 2000 Days maternal and child healthcare framework' in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic by using digital technology has been shown to significantly improve the reach, parental engagement, and child and family outcomes, particularly for those from priority (e.g. regional, rural, and remote communities, Aboriginal communities, children living in socio-economic disadvantage, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities) backgrounds.
- Supporting the establishment and ongoing funding of Child and Family Hubs in NSW to improve attendance and engagement with developmental surveillance and integrate services and supports around families to intervene early
- Wraparound care for children and families with complex needs across multiple sectors, not just health, but also child and family welfare, social support, disability and parental mental health is essential.
- A national approach to support implementation, and training of Service Navigators and utilising e-Navigation tools e.g. "BARB", to assist families in navigating the wider health including parental mental health, infant and child mental health) and social support systems, in addition to education systems.
- Expanding Brighter Beginnings Health Screenings to all playgroups across NSW and other environments where families experiencing vulnerabilities may be would help to ensure earlier identification of needs.
- For some families, attending a child and family hub is not their preferred option (or at least not until trust is built) so playgroups provide a trusted, place-based setting for health checks to occur. We see this particularly for Aboriginal children, children with disabilities or developmental delay, and families and CALD children and families, where in playgroup is the best and most trusted setting for early childhood health checks to occur.
- Utilising schools as community spaces through the NSW Department of Education funding as well as Community Hubs have proven successful models in offering a de-medicalised setting and model for early identification and prevention.

Case Study 1: Early Childhood Health Checks

Background Information and presenting issues

Sally (22 years) and Joshua (2.5 years) lived in a residential area of a large rural NSW town with Sally's fiancé, Jack (28 years) and infant, Sam (3 months). Sally and Joshua were referred to the I-Parent Child Interaction Therapy (I-PCIT) program due to Joshua's difficulties with noncompliance, physical aggression (e.g., hitting parents, teachers, strangers), toy throwing, self-injury (e.g., head banging), running away, and tantrums.

At the initial assessment session, Sally said that she had been struggling to manage Joshua's behaviour since he was 13 months, but had recently become overwhelmed as the behaviours had intensified (for example, tantrums were occurring 7-8 times per day and lasting for as long as 20 minutes) and had become common in a range of settings (home, daycare and in public).

She was also now concerned about the safety of her new baby, Sam. Sally said that she had tried a range of strategies to deal with Joshua's behaviour including placing Joshua in time-out, validating his feelings, yelling, and distraction - but that none of these strategies had helped.

She was now avoiding leaving the house with Joshua for fear that he would run away or that she would not be able to manage his behaviour in a public setting, and she was upset at how angry and stressed she had become when with Joshua at home.

Sally said that she had spoken to one previous health professional about her parenting struggles, but that the health professional's reaction led Sally to feel inadequate and disempowered as a parent.

Sally had a supportive partner and family, and a strong network of friends. On initial assessment, Joshua was loud, dysregulated and appeared disinterested in Sally.

Support overview

Sally and Joshua took part in the full I-PCIT program including a CDI teach session, 7 CDI coaching sessions, a PDI teach session, 7 PDI coaching sessions, a graduation session and some follow-up communication via email in the months following the conclusion of therapy.

Summary of outcomes

During the graduation session, Sally reflected on the course of therapy and noted tremendous improvement in Joshua's behaviour as a result of I-PCIT.

Specifically, she spoke of improvement in Joshua's ability to regulate his emotions, her own sense of confidence in her ability to manage his behaviours at home and in the public places that she had previously avoided, and the new found warmth, positivity, and enjoyment within their relationship. "I go down town now with both kids on my own and I can handle it", Sally said. "Joshua and I are so much closer now…The program changed our life, I did not expect that."

These observations were supported by Joshua's ECBI Intensity score, which over the course of the I-PCIT program had fallen from a total score of 216 (clinical range) to 108 (non-clinical range).

Similarly, the degree to which Sally rated Joshua's behaviours as problematic also improved, falling from a total problem score of 29 (clinical range) to 0 (non-clinical range).

Family Peer Support

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

- Belongside Families
- Early Education (EarlyEd) Inc
- Karitane
- Noah's Inclusion Services
- Orange and District Early Education Program (ODEEP)
- Orana Early Childhood Intervention (OECI)
- Playgroup NSW
- Plumtree Children's Services
- Shaping Outcomes
- Parenting Research Centre

Description of the service

- MyTime is a national, evidence-based peer support program for parents of children with a disability. Developed and coordinated by the Parenting Research Centre in partnership with agencies such as Playgroup NSW it includes virtual and face-to-face, placed based offerings.
- Playgroup NSW Parent Resource Hub with weekly peer to peer family webinars, online workshops and peer support events
- Playgroup NSW PlayLink parent navigation service
- Playgroup NSW PEEP Learning Together Program
- Parent capacity-building support programs e.g. Now & Next, Envisage
- Parent to parent workshops e.g. Let's Talk About… (Plumtree)
- Belongside Connect, individual peer support & navigation service
- Belongside Community, online moderated community group
- Karitane Village Connect Young Parent program
- Karitane Empowering Parents Empowering Communities (EPEC)
- Noah's Inclusion Services Parent Connect Program
- Playgroup NSW Parent Information Line and online Find A Playgroup and Peer Support Group interactive tool

Family eligibility

- Eligibility will vary based on funding source and target group.

Funding Sources

- Department of Social Services
- NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- NDIA Peer Support and Capacity Building Grant
- Philanthropic Grants
- Organisation's own fundraised funds

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- Peer support programs play a powerful role in improving children's development and wellbeing by equipping parents and carers with knowledge, confidence and emotional support. These programs create a relational entry point that can reduce isolation and stress—factors known to impact a child's home environment. When parents feel more hopeful and empowered, they are better positioned to nurture their child's growth and make informed decisions about developmental and health supports. Peer-led support also encourages early goal-setting and strength-based thinking, which supports developmental progress. Across different models, we see that when parents are well-supported, children benefit from more consistent routines, greater family cohesion, and improved access to learning opportunities.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

- To increase the reach and impact of peer support for families of children with developmental concerns, several enhancements are needed. Peer support should be formally recognised as a legitimate form of early intervention and embedded within foundational supports—particularly for families who are not yet eligible for, or are navigating access to, the NDIS.
- Integration into early childhood intervention (ECI) organisations is key and parent-peer support is complementary to the role of non-peer professionals. As an example, services such as Plumtree Children's Services have established processes to incorporate trained parent-peer workers, who offer complementary support to non-peer professionals. This approach ensures families benefit from both professional expertise and lived experience, which together foster stronger engagement, trust, and outcomes.
- At the same time, investment in independent, parent-led organisations is essential so that families can be referred for ongoing peer connection, leadership development, and community-based support. Peer-led programs must be free or low-cost and offered in accessible formats—including online, in-language, and culturally responsive delivery models—to reach diverse families.
- For many, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, peer support provides a safe, non-judgemental entry point after a developmental concern is raised—reducing overwhelm, building confidence, and supporting earlier and more sustained engagement with their child's development.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

- Improved integration of peer support with early childhood, health and disability services requires formal recognition of peer workers within service systems. This includes creating funded roles, training, clear referral pathways, and shared planning processes that include peer workers alongside professionals.
- Professionals should be encouraged to refer families to trusted peer-led programs as a complementary support—particularly during transitions. Integration also means service providers understanding the distinct value of peer work: the trust, shared experience and emotional safety it brings.
- Coordination across sectors (health, education, disability) can ensure that peer support isn't siloed, but woven into a child and family's broader support network.

Case Study 1: Family Peer Support

A parent peer facilitator worked with four neurodivergent couples that included a same-sex couple.

The facilitator created a safe environment where they could share personal experiences of navigating their own neurodivergent diagnoses while raising autistic children.

Despite initial feelings of overwhelm and uncertainty, these parents displayed positivity and hopefulness as a peer group. They felt less isolated, connected with other parents, recognised their own challenges while being optimistic about their ability to support their children. Their experience shows the power of peer support and a strengths-based approach in building resilience and celebrating neurodiversity.

The shift in perspective helped them to see autism not just as a challenge, but as a form of neurodivergence to be embraced with pride that ultimately benefits themselves and their children.

Reflection: This story exemplifies how facilitators trained to be neuro affirming provide a supportive peer environment that embraces diversity. It enables parents to move from a place of uncertainty to one of pride and resilience that positively impacts their lives and their children's futures.

Case Study 2: Family Peer Support

A couple who joined a parent-peer led program described themselves as overwhelmed and not on the same page as parents. They felt as though they were failing in their roles. Through Now & Next, they learned to break down their goals, focus on self-care and identify their strengths. The mother realised that it was okay to ask for help, and that she and her husband could work together as a team.

With this newfound clarity, the couple was able to set and achieve goals and next steps. For example, they prioritised more family time, establishing a regular family night to play board games together.

The father focused on improving his personal health by preparing healthier meals and setting a positive example for the family. The mother committed to enhancing her fitness by joining a netball team and taking time to connect with friends.

Their child benefited from this structured approach with specific goals around establishing better routines, such as consistent routines for bedtime and preparing for school. The mother noticed that as the family connected more to these practices, her child became more motivated and engaged, reducing the need for her to constantly remind or "nag."

They became active contributors, supporting other families during the program. The positive changes they experienced were evident to the facilitators and themselves. The mother reported feeling renewed and less anxious, and the father became more involved in the family's journey, making healthier choices and modelling positive behaviours for their child.

The mother shared: "We were in survival mode and pulling in different directions before we joined the program. We were both apprehensive as often parenting advice seems to concentrate on what more you need to do when you are already time-poor and struggling. The Now & Next program was exactly what we needed. The structured approach and evidence-based tools were great, but what made the program stand out was the gentle pull for us to see the amazing in the ordinary and the successes in the small steps. We left every session more positive and have started to let go of some of the guilt of not being enough. We were starting to acknowledge that what we were doing, we were doing brilliantly! The facilitators were amazingly kind and supportive, and together with the other participants, we felt like friends by the end of the program."

Eary Childhood Intervention

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

- Bridges for Learning
- Early Education (EarlyEd) Inc
- Ethnic Community Services (ECS)
- Early Connections – Manning & Great Lakes, Port Hastings, Kempsey & Coffs Coast
- Firstchance Ltd
- Koorana Child & Family Services Ltd
- KU Children's Services
- Noah's Inclusion Services
- Orange and District Early Education Program (ODEEP)
- Orana Early Childhood Intervention (OECI)
- Plumtree Children's Services
- Shaping Outcomes
- Royal Far West
- SDN Children's Services

Description of the service

- Early childhood intervention includes evidence-based therapies delivered in alignment with the Best Practice Guidelines for Early Childhood Intervention. This includes therapies and supports delivered by a Key Worker, Speech Therapist, Occupational Therapist, Physiotherapist, Psychologist, Specialist Teacher, Social Worker, or Behaviour Support Practitioners.
- Typically delivered as a 'Team around the Child', disciplines work together in a transdisciplinary approach to support a child's developmental goals.
- These supports are delivered in the settings children live, learn and play (also known as 'natural environments') as this enables true needs to be observed and supported.
- Early Childhood Intervention takes a 'capacity-building' approach that builds on children and families' strengths and own resources to help build caregivers' confidence and capability to support children's needs on a day-to-day basis. This includes also group parent /carer therapeutic training supports such as Hanen® speech and language development programs and Key Word Sign training.

Family eligibility

- Eligibility depends on funding sources. However, for the NDIS, many families are restricted due to their visa. For private services, families are often unable to afford this personally which creates equity gaps.

Funding Sources

- NDIS
- Private fee-for-service
- Private Health Funds
- Private Medicare rebates
- In kind unfunded services

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- Early childhood intervention is critical for supporting a child's development. For some children this can support them to reach milestones which they have yet to achieve. For others, it can help avoid loss of skill which can occur with many conditions without intervention. And for others, it may help children with processing their world and reduce negative impacts on their functioning.
- Further to this, with this support, parents will gain the confidence and skills they need to support their child which not only improves outcomes for the child, but also for the parent's wellbeing. We know when parents are well supported, children's outcomes improve.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

Currently there are significant gaps in terms of eligibility and access to this service. For instance:

- Many families lack the appropriate visa to be eligible for the NDIS.
- Many families lack the financial capacity to afford the required assessments for diagnosis.
- Many children have developmental concerns or delays which are not significant enough to make them eligible for the NDIS, but still require intervention and support which is costly through private channels.
- Universal access is required so no child misses on out early childhood intervention.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

Firstly, the NDIS Price Limits have not been indexed in six years' and do not meet the cost of service.

Further, limitations in funding structures make funding for collaboration difficult. This has nudged early childhood intervention services be delivered in ways that don't reflect what is recognised as best practices in early childhood intervention. A review of not only rates, but the structure of funding is required.

- Further, families on temporary and bridging visas may be reluctant to access services in the belief that this would be detrimental to their visa status. Clear information in language from DoHA and NDIS on this issue would be beneficial.
- Thirdly, due to challenges experienced by educators in the early education sector early childhood intervention services delivered have limited opportunity to support meaningful inclusion of children in these settings or capacity build centre staff. Processes being implemented by school are restricting access by therapist particularly at times when children need transition support i.e. to start in school or transition to the next year. Some schools are not permitting access to children in their classroom requiring children to be pulled out of class.

Case Study 1: Early Childhood Intervention
In 2022, Fatima and Amir came to Australia to study and do not meet Australian Visa status. While in Australia they have their first child- Kanza.

Kanza is born with Trisomy 21. She has medical concerns to include a heart condition and has feeding difficulties requiring a nasogastric tube. The local health service is able to support Kanza around her medical conditions and then discharges her. When Kanza enrols in her local ECEC service so that mum and dad can continue to study, the ECEC service contacts their local ECI service as Kanza is not reaching her developmental milestones. She is 18 months when she enrols and unable to sit independently, unable to communicate her needs and shows little interest in the environment around her.

Her local ECI service uses their own funds to support the family with physiotherapy and speech pathology and provides a capacity building approach with the educators at the ECEC and with the family.

After 12 months of unfunded support with the ECI, Kanza was able to pull to stand on furniture. She is now using Key Word sign to request a drink and food, able to indicate no and mum and dad. She is happy at her ECEC and is starting to be mobile to reach out to her peers. The family also understand the different needs of their daughter.

With ongoing unfunded capacity building with the family and ECEC Kanza continues to make great gains. Without these supports Kanza would have received nothing.

Eary Childhood Education

·Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

- Ethnic Community Services (ECS)
- Koorana Child & Family Services Ltd
- KU Children's Services
- Noah's Inclusion Services
- Orange and District Education Program (ODEEP)
- Playgroup NSW
- Plumtree Children's Services
- Royal Far West
- SDN Children's Services

Description of the service

- ECS: Free time limited bicultural support for community and mobile pre-schools
- Koorana, ODEEP, KU Children's Services: Community preschools offer children aged 3-5 years of age up to 600 hours of early learning per year. Curriculum aligns to the Early Years' Learning Framework.
- SDN Children's Services: Autism–specific preschool (SDN Beranga) and autism specific preschool program long day care hybrid model (Waterloo and Macquarie Park), inclusive mainstream preschool and long day care.
- Early childhood intervention in early learning settings: Allied Health supports into preschools, long day care services and into playgroups for children and capacity building for educators.
- Playgroup NSW: PlayStrong playgroup model run by early childhood educators to support children transitioning to formal ECEC settings and to transition into school from playgroup, noting that for many children with disability in particular attending ECEC settings is not always possible, accessible or chosen by the family with playgroups their preferred or only option
- Playgroups: all playgroups themselves are an evidence based early childhood education model that deliver positive developmental outcomes for children, backed by research which shows a child will be 47% more school ready having attended a playgroup than those who didn't, which was a higher outcome than attending daycare and not far off outcomes from attending preschool

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Family eligibility

- Community and Mobile Preschools in NSW are for children aged 3-5 years with priority of access to children aged 4-6 years of age, from disadvantaged backgrounds, First Nations or who have a disability.
- Reside in an area receiving contracted funding from grant
- PlayStrong playgroups are open to all families to attend

Funding Sources

- NSW Department of Education - Start Strong for Community Preschool Funding
- NSW Department of Education - Start Strong Long Day Care
- oNSW Department of Education - Preschool Multicultural Support Program
- oNSW Department of Education – High Learning Support Needs Funding
- NSW Department of Education – Start Strong Pathways Playgroup (PlayStrong Playgroup by Playgroup NSW)
- Commonwealth Child Care Subsidy
- Philanthropic grants and contracts

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- Access to early learning is demonstrated to improve outcomes across the lifespan for children across many domains. School readiness is improved, as well as developmental outcomes and others.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

- Currently in NSW community preschools, children are supported with additional funding through the High Learning Support Needs funding. It would be wonderful to see this funding expanded to more than 600 hours of support to enable those children to attend more days than they can at present.
- Resourcing via a bicultural / bilingual workforce for children from CALD backgrounds with suspected additional needs who require in language assessments.
- Australian Government inclusion support funding is a contribution to the wages of an additional educator and does not cover the full employments costs of the additional educator and is only available for 5 hours each day. Recommend funding the full cost of an additional educator.
- High quality, well-targeted professional development for teachers and educators delivered by providers who understand the early childhood education context.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

- Funding models for early childhood intervention can lead to large volumes of therapists requesting access to early learning centres. This can be disrupting to children and also difficult for early childhood educators to make sense of differing advice and to manage their responsibilities to ensure the safety of all children in their care.
- Review of the NDIS funding models would support better outcomes and enable more quality supports over quantity.

Case Study 1: Early Childhood Education

Lachlan, an Aboriginal boy, started in a not-for-profit long day care centre before he turned three. His mother had escaped domestic violence and was living in temporary housing.

The centre director supported Mum to access Additional Child Care Subsidy so that she had no out of pocket costs for three days a week. Now that he was able to attend regularly Lachlan's teacher identified concerns with his development and talked to Mum about this.

The centre director supported Mum to access developmental assessment, funded by the early childhood education organisation. Lachlan was diagnosed with global developmental delay and, later, autism.

While the centre adjusted the educational program to meet Lachlan's needs, the organisation's self-funded Family Resource Worker helped Mum to access the pathway to NDIS and , as the organisation is a registered NDIS provider, Lachlan and the early childhood education staff could access advice from the Occupational Therapist, Speech Pathologist and Behaviour Support Practitioner.

Mum now has a team that she can draw on, Lachlan is developing his communication and social skills, and is well on the way to transitioning to school with the support he needs.

Parenting Information

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

o Belongside Families
o Early Connections– Manning & Great Lakes, Port Hastings, Kempsey & Coffs Coast
o Ethnic Community Services (ECS)
o Karitane
o KU Children's Services
o Koorana Child and Family Services Ltd
o Noah's Inclusion Services
o Playgroup NSW
o Plumtree Children's Services
o Shaping Outcomes
o Siblings Australia
o SDN Children's Services
o Raising Children Network (National Online Support)

Description of the service

- Parent capacity building fact sheets, workshops, webinars, parent resource hub, parent guides, online resources and training modules
- Stories and tip sheets from parents, families and people with disability
- Place based in reach into playgroups by experts, allied health and subject matter experts to provide information to parents
- Linker, connector, warm referral and navigation service for families
- Parent information sessions alongside play based learning activities in Playgroups delivered in language
- Playgroup NSW Parent Information Line and online Find A Playgroup interactive tool

Family eligibility

No access requirement for parents accessing information through all of our services.

Funding Sources

- Department of Social Services
- NDIA Peer Support and Capacity Building Grant
- NSW Health
- Philanthropic
- Self-funded

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing
Well supported parents who have information feel more confident in supporting their child.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

- Capacity build parents from newly arrived multicultural communities to understand and have knowledge of disability services and systems in Australia. This addresses cultural stigma around disability.
- To enhance this service, providing information on accessing this support without detrimental effects to their visa status would be helpful.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

- Minimise language barriers through bicultural and bilingual support coordinators / support workers
- Further codesign of community facing and locally adapted information resources, based on well-tested codesign approaches
- Support early childhood services in identifying newly arrived communities and where they are located
- Support parents access transport and early childhood checks through allied health services
- Acknowledge that for many newly arrived families there is a financial barrier to accessing services and provide appropriate support
- Acknowledgement of need to support the full family unit at the policy level.

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing
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Parenting Training

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

o Belongside Families
o Early Connections– Manning & Great Lakes, Port Hastings, Kempsey & Coffs Coast
o Karitane
o Koorana Child and Family Services Ltd
o Playgroup NSW
o Plumtree Children's Services
o Shaping Outcomes
o Siblings Australia
o Royal Far West
o SDN Children's Services

Description of the service

- PEEP Learning Together Program is delivered across NSW by Playgroup NSW to parents, playgroup facilitators and early childhood professionals
- Triple P- Stepping Stones
- Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)
- Smalltalk
- Now & Next
- We Care: Autism and We Care: Developmental Delay
- Circle of Security
- Tuning into Kids
- Envisage
- Healthy Mothers Healthy Families
- Belongside interactive capacity building workshops
- SibWorks parenting training
- Playgroup NSW Parent Resource Hub with parent capacity seminars, workshops, fact sheets, video series and online resource hub
- Bespoke trainings based on common themes
- Playgropu NSW MyTime parenting training sessions across NSW
- Playgroup NSW PlayConnect+ playgroups for children with disability with embedded parent training and online options for parents

Family eligibility

- Varies by funding source/topic
- Accessed assessment /diagnostic service (RFW)

Funding Sources

- NSW Health Grant /Philanthropic
- Department of Social Services
- NDIA Peer Support & Capacity Building Grant
- Philanthropic grants
- NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- Self-funded by organisations

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- Parenting programs can support the development of skills and effective practices to support parents.
- Parenting programs can include content on parenting skills, parent mental health, parent confidence, socio- emotional support and child well-being.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

- Promotion of toolkits with effective parenting strategies that a family can choose what works for their family and their child's unique needs.
- What's needed to improve integration with other services
- Place based offerings- easy access and promotion.

Parenting Coaching

Members Delivering this Service
o SDN Children's Services
o Playgroup NSW

Description of the service
- SDN: CaPS (Child and Parenting Support Program) - To improve the wellbeing of children, through coaching caregivers to build their capacity to provide safe and supported homes and to navigate systems. Uses teach, model, coach, review model and Circle of Security.
- Playgroup NSW: Include2Play ILC program funded by DSS aimed at supporting and coaching parents from CALD backgrounds

Family eligibility
- Newly arrived migrants and CaLD families
- Families not accessing any other services
- Families with vulnerabilities which may escalate risk factors for children
- Caregivers who have a disability and/or a child with a disability

Funding Sources
- Dept. Of Social Services: CaPS and ILC

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing
- Increased parent confidence.
- Increased parent connections within community that support them in their parenting role.
- System navigation for parents
- Increased parent understanding of typical child development
- Reduced social isolation of parents and children

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays
Improved access to allied health, psychology and early childhood education for asylum seekers and others with visas that exclude NDIS and CCS.
Embed the models into every program and service for children.

What's needed to improve integration with other services
Improved, funded community based early intervention (outside NDIS) with capacity and an expectation to connect with services like CAPS to create a team around these families.

Case Study 1: Parent Coaching

Delima is a single mother and asylum seeker who fled family violence in Malaysia with her son, Ahmad, a fun child with a passion for sensory activities who also has Autism Spectrum Disorder, Level 3, ADHD and a Developmental Delay.

Like many other asylum seekers, Delima is on a limited visa, and has no access to Medicare, and government support like the NDIS or childcare subsidy. Delima knew that Ahmad needed help before he started school but didn't know where or how to access it. This, along with her uncertain visa status, on a bridging visa that had to be renewed every few months, and a reluctance to leave the house with Ahmad, left her with a feeling of hopelessness.

Family Resource Worker, Sarah*, who works for the Child and Parenting Support (CaPS) program, met Delima and Ahmad when Ahmad was three. "When I met Delima, Ahmad was nonverbal, had a developmental delay and Delima was socially isolated," Sarah said. "I quickly realised both mother and son needed access to the community and opportunities to interact with their peers."

Sarah supported Delima to access community health, get a formal diagnosis and access the government's early childhood intervention program, which provides free but limited speech and occupational therapy for children under 7 who are not eligible for the NDIS.

"I also knew I could help more directly," Sarah said. "I'm not a speech pathologist but I had completed a course called SPARK which taught me the skills and techniques for building speech development in children. I used my training to support Delima to implement strategies that complemented the limited speech therapy Ahmad was receiving. Ahmad slowly began to use words and became more confident in understanding directions."

Supported by Sarah, Delima was able to successfully toilet-train Ahmad in less than six weeks. Finally, Sarah expanded Delima and Ahmad's social network by linking them to their local library which offered free programs such as playgroups, reading and singing.

"Ahmad was able to learn how to interact with other children," Sarah said. "But that wasn't the only benefit, Delima made friends with another mum with a child with Autism and was able to start building a social network. More recently, I've connected the family to a Start Strong coordinator who was able to enrol Ahmad in a preschool."

Siblings Support Services

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

o Siblings Australia

Description of the service

- Webinars and presentation to families on supporting siblings
- SibWorks parenting training
- Family counselling

Family eligibility

- Available to all families

Funding Sources

- Philanthropic
- Department of Social Services
- Fee for service

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- When siblings feel informed, supported, and included, they are more likely to develop positive relationships with their brother or sister, which fosters a sense of belonging and security for the child with disability.
- Supported siblings are better equipped to engage in shared play, model social behaviours, and contribute to a nurturing home environment, key ingredients for early learning and emotional growth.
- Early investment in sibling support also reduces the risk of stress or confusion that can otherwise impact the sibling dynamic, helping all children in the family to thrive.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

- A more intentional, integrated approach within early childhood systems is needed at present. This includes formal recognition of siblings in early intervention and family support frameworks, alongside greater awareness among professionals about the vital role siblings play in a child's development.
- The current structure of the NDIS does not support this whole-of-family approach, and "family supports" as practiced through the NDIS distil to "parental supports." Families are told that sibling supports are "parental responsibility" without recognition of the complexity of the sibling relationship.

- Support for families must be holistic, with practical guidance for parents on nurturing healthy sibling relationships from the start.
- Building workforce capacity through training and education will ensure that sibling considerations are embedded across service systems.
- To sustain and scale these efforts, policy and funding mechanisms must explicitly include sibling supports.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

- Improved integration requires early childhood, health, and education services to formally recognise and embed sibling needs into family-centred practice.
- Outside the NDIS, foundational supports and mainstream systems must step in to provide targeted sibling support, ensuring siblings are included in early planning and resourced through community-based, cross-sector collaboration.

Community Capacity Building Services

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)

o EarlyEd
o Koorana Child & Family Services Ltd
o Plumtree
o SDN Children's Services
o Playgroup NSW

Description of the service

- Historically, community-based organisations were block funded to build community capacity as a core part of their mission. This work was deeply embedded in local communities and responsive to their unique and evolving needs. With the introduction of the NDIS and the transition to individualised funding, most organisations have had to scale down these efforts, as the funding model no longer supports this work in the same way. However, many organisations continue to invest in community capacity building—either as a matter of principle or through securing alternative funding sources— it remains vital to fostering inclusive communities.
- Some organisations have accessed funding through the Department of Social Services' ILC grants, such as Community and Me and Libraries as Community Connectors, to continue building inclusive practices and community capacity. These programs support families to feel welcomed and supported in everyday community settings, and help local services better understand and include children with disability.
- Other funded early childhood intervention and education services, such as those supported by NSW Start Strong Pathways, provide inclusion capacity-building training and mentoring to mainstream children's services, including playgroups and community libraries. These initiatives help local services to:
- Include children with disabilities meaningfully in their programs
- Refer families to appropriate supports when needed
- Recognise possible developmental concerns early
- These services also walk alongside families to connect them with early childhood education opportunities, fostering a smoother transition into formal education settings.
- Further, some services are funded through grants to partner directly with schools, delivering training and coaching in inclusive practices.
- For community playgroups, Playgroup NSW offers crucial backbone support, helping volunteers understand disability, build inclusive practices, and connect families to relevant supports, including supported playgroups.

Service eligibility

- Eligibility to participate in inclusion-focused community programs varies based on the funding source.

Funding Sources

- NSW Department of Education – Start Strong Pathways
- Commonwealth Department of Social Services – Communities for Children
- Department of Social Services – Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC)
- Small grants e.g. Club Grants

These sources enable a range of services and programs to build inclusive capacity in community settings. However, funding is often time-limited or tied to narrow eligibility, restricting broader or sustained impact.

This is particularly true for community grants. These are time consuming to apply for and report on, have small funding buckets, do not pay what it takes and expect in-kind contributions.

Organisations are competing against urgent community issues like the cost-of-living challenges and disasters rather that activities that will have a long-term impact.

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing

- When educators, volunteers, caregivers, and mainstream community services are supported to understand and respond to the needs of all children—including those with developmental delay or disability—outcomes improve not just for individual children, but for communities as a whole.
- A common misconception is that development only occurs during formal therapy sessions. In reality, young children learn best through everyday routines and natural interactions. When families and mainstream services—such as libraries, playgroups, swim schools, and sports clubs—are equipped to embed inclusive practices, children have more opportunities to build and generalise skills in real-world settings.
- Investing in the capacity of caregivers, educators, and mainstream community staff enhances their confidence, reduces stress, and builds competence. This leads to more sustainable, empowering outcomes for children, families, and the broader network of people supporting them.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

To increase the reach and impact of inclusion-focused community programs, the following enhancements are needed:

- Long Term investment for sustainable community capacity building. Move beyond short-term project grants. To embed inclusive practices and across a range of community settings projects need to last long enough to help organisations implement and adapt strategies, monitor and evaluate outcomes.
- Tailored support for individual children, alongside broader workforce capacity-building—such as training on inclusive environments, sensory regulation tools, and behaviour support strategies
- Targeted funding for mainstream services—like swim schools, arts programs, sports, dance classes, libraries, and community centres—to not just build their initial confidence and capability in including children with diverse needs but to continue to walk beside services as they implement the strategies they are learning and build on their skills over time.
- Support for community-based early childhood programs, including playgroups, child and family centres, and local parenting programs, to serve as inclusive, soft entry points into the service system. These services benefit from local mentors and accessible training, trusted relationships, access to inclusion resources, and stronger connections with supported playgroups and specialised services.
- Evidence-based models such as community playgroups have demonstrated the value of place-based, peer-supported inclusion. Backbone organisations, such as Playgroup NSW and others working in libraries or multicultural hubs, require consistent investment to provide volunteer training, culturally appropriate resources, and coordination support.

What's needed to improve integration with other services

- Improving integration between inclusive community-based programs and the broader early childhood and disability support systems requires a stronger focus on collaboration across sectors.
- Community organisations, universal services, and disability-specific providers must be supported to work together to deliver more coordinated, responsive, and family-centred support.

Key actions include:

- Strengthen local navigation support by funding trusted community organisations to help families access the right support at the right time. These organisations often serve as the first point of contact—particularly for families not yet connected to formal systems—and can play a critical role in linking them to early intervention or NDIS pathways.
- Re-establish place-based integration platforms, building on the legacy of programs like the Early Childhood Intervention Coordination Program—a 20-year initiative funded by NSW Ageing, Disability and Home Care prior to the NDIS. These platforms brought together early childhood services, health, education, and community organisations to plan, refer, and respond collaboratively to the needs of children and families and undertaken joint projects that met local needs.
- Fund cross-sector collaboration between community organisations, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, health providers, and NDIA-funded services. Joint professional development, shared referral tools, and warm handover protocols can significantly improve the experience for families.
- Invest in public awareness campaigns to increase understanding of foundational supports and how they complement targeted and NDIS services. These campaigns should be accessible to families, educators, health workers, and mainstream community services, helping to create a more informed and connected ecosystem of support.
- Integration works best when families feel known and supported, and are not left to navigate fragmented systems alone. A collaborative, community-based approach—built on strong local relationships and shared accountability—ensures that children and families can access timely, inclusive, and coordinated support, no matter where they start their journey.

Case Study 1: Community Capacity Building

As part of the Libraries as Community Connectors initiative, Elizabeth Khater, a children's librarian at City of Canada Bay Libraries, participated in Plumtree's online training and mentorship program.

This experience led to significant changes in how the library engaged with families of children with disabilities.

Elizabeth applied the inclusive strategies learned through the program to revamp Storytime sessions, incorporating sensory-friendly elements and alternative communication methods.

These adjustments created a more welcoming and accessible environment for all children, regardless of their abilities.

The transformation not only enhanced the library's programs but also fostered stronger connections with the community. It demonstrated how targeted training and support can enable mainstream services to confidently include and support children with diverse needs.

Case Study 2: Community Capacity Building
One provider has been working with a local public school through Department of Social Services Communities for Children funding. The deputy principal specifically requested some support/strategies with more a group of kindergarten students. They did not have space for the children in the support unit and they had no formal diagnoses yet; however, they were demonstrating needs which exceeded the capacity of the classrooms.

The provider put together a strategies page and also did a tailored Q and A for the teachers to ask their own questions about sensory regulation, strategies to help with routines and increasing participation, and funding options. A full sensory regulation workshop is planned for the teachers, next term. They also did a parent Q and A and had questions from parents with concerns about their child's communication and development and they were able to recommend services and give some professional opinions and recommendations.

The deputy principal has communicated that the supports made a significant difference in supporting their educators and creating successful transitions for these children into school.

Case Study 3: Community Capacity Building
DET NSW Start Strong Pathways: To reach out to find families needing Start Strong Pathways supports EarlyEd connected with community child and family activities.

These community playgroup facilitators were keen for help to run programs that met the diverse needs of the families and children. As a family is more likely to help their child access to formal early education if they and have had positive experiences in informal early education programs capacity building community playgroup leaders was an essential part of our Start Strong Pathways support.

Partner X jumped at the opportunity to partners to support her playgroup. Together we identified challenges, set goals and co-designed a support plan. These were monitored and adjusted to ensure Partner X was acquiring the skills she was after."

Playgroup facilitators wanted support in catering for the diverse ages, interests and learning styles of the children.

"With Partner X we asked families what they wanted, observed the children (What were they telling us?), mapped this information, and planned strategies and inclusive practices to continue to be use when I wasn't there."

Over time facilitators wanted to learn more about
-identifying developmental milestones and what might be a concern
-approaching and supporting families with this information.
-referral pathways and
-supporting their children to be ready to learn and able to access early learning services.

"Partner X built her own knowledge so she could continue to support families on her own. We don't need to visit regularly but will if there is a family who needs support. We check in regularly and share new ideas."

Playgroup facilitators can be quite isolated especially if they are a part of a standalone community service and have limited time to network with other playgroup facilitators.

A Dooleys Club Grant and another later from North Sydney Council funded us to offer playgroup facilitators/ childcare staff Pop-In lunch time short 45 min training for a few months. Over 70 attended the 6 session and the feedback was "we needed more and longer sessions".

Toy Libraries

Members Delivering this Service (Alphabetical)
- EarlyEd Cubby House Toy Library
- Playgroup NSW

Description of the service
Place-based or mobile services where families borrow a wide variety of
-educational toys and resources,
-play and recreational equipment as well as
-specialised toys and equipment.

These accessible, inclusive, community services
-provide equity of access to early play and learning,
-facilitate community connections,
-are a welcoming soft entry point to child and family services,
-address cost of living pressures, and
-support children and families to learn the value of caring for and sharing belongings with others.

With the funding of educators and allied health staff, volunteer training programs and suitable venues, toy libraries can provide tailored individualised early childhood intervention when there are concerns about a child's development or a diagnosed disability or developmental delay.

These services:
-capacity build family members to engage their children in play-based learning and activities that promote social connection and
-provide the advice they need about their child when they need it.

More information about toy libraries is available from Toy Libraries Australia.
https://www.toylibraries.org.au/

Examples of these services include:
Services offer browsing and borrowing as well as
-online ordering,
-Click and Collect sites for pick up and returns,
-stay and play sessions and
-parcel lockers.

Family eligibility
All families are eligible to join a library. Council run libraries are usually free. Community services have a membership fee.

Funding Sources
Current funding – unpredictable.

Most not-for-profit toy libraries' basic lending services are self-funded through a mix of membership fees, corporate sponsorships, rent assistance from Councils and community grants and are propped up by toy donations, fundraising, in-kind supports, and volunteering.

Some are supported by
-longer term philanthropic programs and
-government funding i.e. Start Strong Pathways funding from the Department of Education.
-local government grants or support
-charity donations such as Rotary Clubs

Role on child's overall development, health and wellbeing
Access to borrowing provides play-based opportunities for all children of all abilities even the youngest that
- promote play across a wide range of learning areas
- create opportunities to practice play or play in different ways in developmental areas that need support every day in familiar environments
- motivate play when toys are selected based on a child's interests, preferences, developmental levels
- reduce clutter and helps families make the most of the space they have at home for play and
- offer toy choices that can accommodate or adapt to a child physical or sensory limitations.

Library workers can capacity build families to select toys that meet their child's needs, engage in positive adult/child interactions through play, and encourage families by creating non-judgmental relationships to ask questions and seek out advice early.

What's needed to enhance this offering for children with developmental concerns or delays

Fund more toy libraries in NSW:
Currently in NSW there are 72 toy libraries supporting only 180,600 children as members. There are significant gaps in coverage state-wide. Compared to other states (though not including Tasmania) NSW is the state in Australia, with the second lowest number of libraries i.e. (15) per 100,000 children, only 4% of children 0-4 years identified as borrowing from toy libraries (the second lowest state alongside Western Australia).

Multi-year funding - pays what it takes to:
o operate from sites that are local, welcoming, accessible and fit for purpose
o enable opening hours/strategies that suit the lives families across the state.
o use strategies to support all families to make use of the resources including rural and remote families i.e. mobile services, online borrowing, Click and Collect services and parcel lockers.

Reinstate early childhood intervention funding for early childhood educators and allied health staff:
o Toy libraries can then provide tailored individualised early childhood interventions that capacity build family members to engage their children in play-based learning and activities that promote social connection
o stay and play sessions to promote the educational value of play for younger children, encourage positive adult/child interactions through play, and create strong community connections
o support for educational and community services to make the most of play and learning opportunities for children with disabilities and delays and
o advice to families about their child when they need it.

·**What's needed to improve integration with other services**

Toy libraries need to:
o be based near mainstream community locations near where families and children meet and play e.g playgroups, community halls, schools, community centres, parks, shops
o have the capacity to be mobile or offer Click and Collect type services in order to engage where early childhood intervention, health, family and community services are, particularly where multicultural and indigenous families learn, live and play.

Case Study 1: Toy Libraries

Survey feedback:

- Reasons for using Click and Collect at 4 new sites: reduced travel, easier than browsing, no car, easy with kids, can pick up in my lunch hour.
- Time saver / Convenient
- I really like click and collect as I can go through all the toys (with my daughter) looking online from the comfort of our house.
- It can be a struggle to take my daughter out due to some behavioural issues, but I really want her to be able to help to choose the toys she'd like so this way works really well for us.
- It is less overwhelming than trying to find a toy on shelf that I might want. It is faster to do a click and collect vs browsing. I don't have the time to browse during lunch time on Monday when I work- time just enough to come by and drop off and pick up. I don't drive so I walk to the North Sydney collection. It's convenient.
- Thank you for everything. My son really looks forward to the new toys. We've had so much fun with them and there is so much variety. My daughter who just turned 1 is also starting to play with them too.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a range of critical services that community not-for-profits provide to support children with developmental concerns, delays and disabilities and their families.

Our alliance represents a range of organisations who deliver critical infrastructure to these supports across NSW. We individually and collectively have deep community engagement, relationships and networks to deliver important aspects of support for children and families on this journey. However, changes are required to make these services more accessible, to better meet the needs of children and families and to be better integrated across the state. Further, to ensure the sustainability of quality providers delivering these services.

We seek that this Inquiry pay particular attention to key considerations that are required to ensure the success of foundational supports, including but not limited to:

- Community-led services and supports, with children and families firmly at the centre
- Investment in the not for profit sector
- Culturally- safe and appropriate services and supports
- Integrated care though a cross-sector approach and reduction of silos
- System and service navigation support for families
- Evidence-based services and supports aligned to Best Practice Guidelines
- Community-based, local and trusted services and supports
- Sustainability for quality providers is key, underpinned by relational contracting and long term funding contracts
- Workforce shortages, broader care sector parity and competition across the disability, aged care and early childhood sectors
- Current greenshoots exist to scale, to be recognised, piloted and expanded
- Consideration of past successful programs and commissioning frameworks

CaFSA offers our full support to the NSW Government to help co-design foundational supports and collaborate closely with the broader ecosystem to ensure that children and family's needs are met.

We welcome the opportunity to provide our submission to this Inquiry and wholly support consultation, co-design or the sharing of further information. CAFSA NSW is available to attend a Hearing to share more of our diverse expertise and recommendations.

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Endorsing Organisations

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