Siblings australia inc

for siblings of children and adults with disability/illness

Submission to the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in New South Wales

June 2025

Siblings Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in New South Wales. For over 25 years, Siblings Australia has worked to increase recognition and support for siblings of children with disability, chronic illness, or mental health concerns. We focus on strengthening sibling wellbeing, the sibling relationship, and the broader family system – elements that begin to take shape in the early years.

We commend the Committee for including in its terms of reference the "experiences of children with disability, and their parents and carers" (Item 1(i)). However, we note the omission of siblings in this framing. In the context of early childhood, siblings (particularly those who are themselves very young) play a critical role in family dynamics and can be significantly affected by the experience of growing up alongside a brother or sister with additional needs.

Key Points of Consideration

Wellbeing of siblings as a component of children's safety and development (ToR 1(a) and 1(b))

Disability, chronic illness, or developmental differences in one child inevitably affect the dynamics and emotional climate of the family as a whole. Young siblings:

- Are frequently exposed to early and repeated experiences of distress, unpredictability, or trauma in the home environment
- May develop anxious behaviours, emotional regulation difficulties, or signs of "parentification" (ie, adopting caring responsibilities beyond their years)
- Often suppress their own emotional needs, seeking not to add pressure to already stretched parents or educators

These impacts can manifest in the ECEC setting through social withdrawal, behavioural issues, or developmental delays. Educators who are unaware of a child's sibling context may misinterpret or overlook key signs of distress.

Gaps in training and practice regarding the sibling experience (ToR 1(b), 1(g))

Current training for early childhood educators tends to focus on the individual child or parental dynamics. There is little focus on:

- How to recognise and respond to the needs of siblings of children with disability
- How to engage siblings in inclusive ways without assigning them informal care responsibilities
- How to support healthy sibling relationships as part of early social development

Siblings Australia has developed resources, including practice guides and professional development tools (eg, SibWise), to support education and care professionals in understanding and working with siblings. Embedding these approaches in early childhood training programs would ensure more equitable outcomes for families navigating complexity.

Opportunities to strengthen inclusion and equity (ToR 1(i))

Inclusive early childhood education must extend beyond the enrolment of children with disability to account for the needs and contributions of their siblings. In particular, we recommend:

- Sibling-sensitive practice guidance for ECEC educators (developed in consultation with Siblings Australia) to identify and support young siblings at risk
- Sibling Support Plans akin to Individual Learning Plans, where educators can note and respond to social-emotional needs arising from a child's sibling role
- Data collection and visibility of siblings affected by disability or chronic illness to better inform planning and resourcing
- Family-centred inclusion frameworks that address the whole family system, not only the child enrolled with additional needs

Recommendations

To better support children and families in the early years, Siblings Australia recommends:

- Explicitly include siblings in ECEC policy frameworks, particularly those related to family engagement, inclusion, and child wellbeing
- Invest in professional development that upskills educators on the sibling experience, including emotional risks and protective strategies
- Embed sibling perspectives in future revisions to the National Quality Framework (NQF) to ensure early education providers understand the role siblings play in both inclusion and vulnerability
- Develop and disseminate best practice guidance for ECEC services on working with siblings—building on existing collaboration between Siblings Australia and education departments
- Support the rollout of peer-based programs (such as SibWorks) within early childhood settings that have high numbers of children impacted by disability in their families

Conclusion

True inclusion in early childhood settings must be holistic and family-focused. Siblings, particularly those in their formative years, need recognition and support in their own right. Doing so not only enhances their developmental and mental health outcomes but strengthens the family unit and supports children with disability to thrive alongside their siblings.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Committee and to support future efforts to embed sibling-inclusive practice in the NSW early childhood sector.

Siblings 25 YEARS
australia inc
for siblings of children and adults with disability/illness