Siblings
australia inc

for siblings of children and adults with disability/illness

Supporting Siblings to Deliver Thriving Kids

A proposal to State and Territory Governments

February 2026

Purpose

This document outlines a proposal for State and Territory Governments to invest in evidence-informed sibling supports as a core component of Thriving Kids implementation at the local level.

Thriving Kids represents a significant reform to how Australia supports children aged 8 years and under with developmental delay and/or autism with low to moderate support needs, and their families. While Thriving Kids is nationally designed and jointly funded, its success will depend on effective delivery through state and territory systems, services and workforces.

The Thriving Kids Advisory Group's Final Report (December 2025) explicitly recognises siblings as part of the Thriving Kids cohort and embeds family wellbeing, peer support, capacity building, and delivery in everyday settings as foundational principles of the model. This paper sets out a clear model to operationalise those principles by strengthening how siblings are seen, supported and included within state and territory delivery of Thriving Kids.

This paper has been delivered as an across-government proposal for consideration by state and territory departments who will take carriage of delivery of Thriving Kids within their jurisdictions. Further details, or meetings, on any aspect are available on request.

About Siblings Australia

Siblings Australia is the only national organisation dedicated to supporting the brothers and sisters of people with disability and chronic illness.

For more than 25 years, Siblings Australia has worked across policy, practice, research and service delivery to ensure siblings are seen, supported and recognised as a critical part of Australia's care and support ecosystem. Siblings Australia not only has specialist expertise, it has a proven capability to deliver outcomes.

Over the past four years, Siblings Australia has supported more than 50,000 siblings and worked with over 500 organisations nationally. Independent economic modelling demonstrates that our work delivers approximately $28 in community benefit for every $1 invested, primarily through avoided downstream costs in health, mental health, education and disability systems.

Siblings Australia works collaboratively with governments, schools, early childhood services, health providers and community organisations to deliver scalable, evidence-informed programs that strengthen family wellbeing and reduce long-term system pressure.

Policy and reform context

The Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) recommended significant investment in supports for children and families outside the NDIS, leading to the development of Foundational Supports and the Thriving Kids initiative.

The Thriving Kids Advisory Group Final Report affirms that:

- Thriving Kids must be child-centred, family-centred and strengths-based
- Family wellbeing is integral to child outcomes
- Parents, siblings, carers and kin are central contributors to children's development
- Supports should be delivered in everyday settings where children live, learn and play
- Workforce capability and capacity building are enabling components of the model

As Thriving Kids moves from design to implementation, State and Territory Governments are increasingly responsible for commissioning, integrating and delivering services through education, early childhood, health and community systems. This creates both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that sibling support is embedded in specialist and mainstream services as part of local Thriving Kids delivery, consistent with the national model.

Why sibling support matters

Siblings are often the longest-lasting relationship in the life of a person with disability or developmental difference. Research has shown that when siblings are supported, informed and emotionally resourced, the benefits extend across families and systems.

For state and territory systems, effective sibling support contributes to:

- Improved family functioning and reduced family stress
- Better engagement with early childhood education and school
- Reduced behavioural escalation and school disengagement among siblings
- Lower demand on child and adolescent mental health services
- Stronger informal safeguarding around children with developmental support needs

Conversely, when siblings are unsupported, they experience elevated risks of anxiety, depression, educational disengagement and early caring responsibilities.[1]

These impacts are often first felt in state systems (schools, community services and mental health services) long before they appear in national datasets.

Supporting siblings is therefore a preventative, system-strengthening investment that aligns directly with state and territory responsibilities.

Supporting siblings in their own right also delivers direct and meaningful benefits for children with disability or developmental difference. When siblings are emotionally supported, informed and resourced, they are better able to engage positively with their brother or sister, contributing to more stable relationships, reduced conflict and stronger informal safeguarding over time.

[1] Trew S (2024). Made to feel different: Families perspectives on external responses to autism and the impacts on family well-being and relationships. *Autism*, 28:2120-39; Singer H, et al. (2025). Caregivers and Coping: Well-Being, Depression, and Coping Strategies Among Caregivers of Young Adults With Developmental Disabilities. *Am J Intellect Dev Disabil*, 130:41-62; Wolff B, et al. (2023). Individual-Level Risk and Resilience Factors Associated with Mental Health in Siblings of Individuals with Neurodevelopmental Conditions: A Network Analysis. *Developmental Neuropsychology*, 48:112-34. Wolff B, et al. (2024). Stability and change in self-reported risk and resilience factors associated with mental health of siblings of individuals with and without neurodevelopmental conditions over 15 months. *Advances in Mental Health*, 22:653-81

This strengthens the child's everyday environment - at home, at school and in the community - by reducing family stress, improving parental capacity and supporting more consistent routines and care. Children with disability benefit from calmer family systems, greater continuity of support and siblings who are equipped to understand their needs without being overburdened by them. In this way, sibling support is not ancillary to outcomes for children with disability; it is a practical mechanism for improving wellbeing, participation and long-term stability.

Alignment with the Thriving Kids model

The Thriving Kids Advisory Group explicitly includes siblings within the Thriving Kids cohort and identifies sibling-inclusive approaches across multiple elements of the model, including:

- Universal parenting supports
- Facilitated peer support for parents and siblings
- Family capacity building
- Delivery in everyday environments such as early childhood settings, schools and community hubs
- Workforce development to support best-practice, family-centred approaches

Sibling-specific supports do not sit outside the Thriving Kids model; they are and must be embedded throughout the model as a practical expression of its service principles. Investment in sibling support strengthens the model's ability to deliver holistic, preventative and equitable outcomes at scale.

Proposed areas for investment

Siblings Australia seeks state and territory investment to support the following interconnected areas of Thriving Kids delivery.

1. Research-informed sibling program

Siblings Australia is currently working with international research partners to adapt and pilot proven sibling support models in the Australian context:

- **Children aged 6-9**: In partnership with researchers in the Netherlands, we are piloting an evidence-based program that has demonstrated significant improvements in emotional wellbeing, resilience, and family functioning for child siblings.
- **Teen siblings and parents**: In collaboration with researchers in Norway, we are exploring a program that supports adolescent siblings alongside their parents, reflecting international best practice where siblings are recognised as stakeholders in care systems.

Both programs are designed for online delivery, ensuring accessibility for families across metropolitan, regional, and remote Australia. Additional funding would enable broader pilots, formal evaluation, and wider implementation.

Additional investment would enable:

- Expanded delivery aligned to Thriving Kids cohorts
- Local partnerships with state-based services
- Formal evaluation and continuous improvement

2. SibWorks delivered at education sites or via school networks

SibWorks is an evidence-based, early-intervention peer support program for children aged 8–12 who have a sibling with a disability, chronic illness, or developmental delay. Online or in person, delivering SibWorks through school sites aligns strongly with Thriving Kids principles of accessibility and delivery in everyday settings. It is endorsed by Beyond Blue as part of their Be You accreditation for evidence-based efficacy.

School-based delivery:

- Reduces barriers to access
- Normalises sibling support within wellbeing frameworks
- Supports early identification of sibling stress
- Strengthens collaboration between families and schools

Programs are designed to complement core educational functions.

Governments may also wish to facilitate delivery of online modules that could be delivered either within school hours or during students' own time, with access guided by school referrals.

3. SibWise workforce training

SibWise is a training program designed for parents, educators and medical and allied health professionals to build awareness and capability to recognise and respond to sibling needs. It uses real-life scenarios and practical resources to help adults recognise and respond to the unique emotional challenges and strengths of these siblings. Training can be delivered to:

- Teachers and school wellbeing staff
- Early childhood educators
- Disability and family support workers
- Medical and allied health practitioners working with families post-diagnosis

SibWise aligns directly with the Thriving Kids emphasis on enabling workforce development and supports consistent, family-centred practice across systems.

4. Early childhood resource development

The early childhood period is a critical window for family stress, particularly around diagnosis and early intervention. There is currently a significant gap in age-appropriate, sibling-inclusive resources in this space.

Funding is sought to:

- Engage early childhood and developmental experts
- Co-design sibling-specific resources with families
- Develop, test and refine evidence-informed materials
- Embed resources within early years and Thriving Kids pathways

This work would complement existing early childhood services while strengthening whole-family resilience.

5. Supporting continuity through education records

Children who grow up with a sibling with disability, chronic illness or developmental difference often experience cumulative and evolving pressures across their schooling years. These pressures may fluctuate over time, intensify during key transition points, or emerge differently as family circumstances change. However, they are rarely visible within education systems unless a crisis occurs or a student actively discloses their circumstances.

There is a strong case for education systems to consider mechanisms for capturing and carrying forward sibling context within student records or wellbeing information systems, in a manner that is proportionate, respectful and focused on support rather than labelling.

Recording sibling context (where families choose to share this information) would:

- Provide educators with a broader understanding of factors that may influence a student's wellbeing, engagement or behaviour
- Support earlier, more informed responses when a student shows signs of stress, fatigue or disengagement
- Reduce the burden on students and families to repeatedly explain their circumstances as teachers, schools or year levels change
- Enable continuity of understanding across transitions, including early years to primary school and primary to secondary school

For educators, access to this contextual information supports more responsive, trauma-informed and inclusive practice. It does not require specialist intervention, but rather enables everyday adjustments, such as flexibility, proactive check-ins or referral to appropriate supports, to be made with greater confidence and empathy.

Importantly, this approach mirrors existing practices used to record and respond to other forms of vulnerability or support need within education systems, without conflating sibling status with disability or deficit. Instead, it recognises sibling experience as a relevant aspect of a student's life context that may shape their educational experience. Embedding this information within student records, alongside appropriate governance, privacy safeguards and family consent, would strengthen schools' capacity to support students over time and align with broader wellbeing and inclusion objectives across state and territory education systems.

System benefits for jurisdictions

Investment in sibling support delivers tangible benefits for state and territory governments, including:

- Reduced pressure on education and mental health systems
- Improved early identification and prevention
- Strengthened informal support networks around children with developmental support needs
- Better navigation and engagement with services
- More sustainable implementation of Thriving Kids at the local level

Sibling support represents a low-cost, high-impact lever that strengthens the invisible infrastructure sustaining families and public systems.

Conclusion

Siblings are not peripheral to the Thriving Kids model - they are explicitly recognised within it. As Thriving Kids moves into implementation, State and Territory Governments have a critical opportunity to embed sibling-inclusive approaches that strengthen outcomes for children, families and systems.

With modest, targeted investment, Siblings Australia is well positioned to partner with jurisdictions to deliver scalable, evidence-informed sibling supports that align with Thriving Kids service principles and local delivery realities.

Supporting siblings is not an optional enhancement to Thriving Kids. It is central to making the reform work.