Siblings australia inc

for siblings of children and adults with disability/illness

Policy Paper

Siblings in Thriving Kids: The Invisible Infrastructure of Australian Families

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Siblings in Thriving Kids: The Invisible Infrastructure of Australian Families

Position

Thriving Kids will not deliver on its own definition of family unless siblings are named, funded, and designed for, not assumed.

The Australian Government's own Thriving Kids framing states that children "may be supported by their parent/s, carer/s, sibling/s or kin." That is the right starting point.

The Thriving Kids Advisory Group's Final Report, the document underpinning the national model, goes further still, naming siblings within the Thriving Kids cohort and identifying parents, siblings, carers and kin as central contributors to children's development.

But across every implementation document published so far, siblings disappear the moment the detail arrives. Parents are named. Carers are named. The workforce, the governance, and the funded "glue" holding services together are all named.

Siblings are not.

This is a pattern, and patterns are fixable at the design stage in a way they are not once systems are built.

Why this matters

Siblings are not incidental to a child's development story.

They are part of the household absorbing family stress, and the evidence says so plainly: 84% of adult siblings report family stress was an issue during their own childhood, 66% report anxiety, and 54% report depression. These outcomes accumulate quietly, without a diagnosis, without a service system built to notice them, and often without anyone asking the sibling how they are doing.

The NDIS was built on the assumption that families have strong, enduring informal supports in place. Thriving Kids inherits the same assumption, just earlier, before school age, before diagnosis. Siblings are frequently that informal support. A system designed to strengthen family capacity cannot overlook the family member most likely to be quietly compensating for what the system does not yet provide.

Supporting siblings also strengthens outcomes for the child with disability or developmental difference. When siblings are emotionally supported and equipped to understand their brother or sister's needs, family relationships are more stable, conflict reduces, and parents have greater capacity for consistent care. Sibling support is not ancillary to Thriving Kids' goals for the child with additional needs. It is one of the more practical mechanisms available for improving them.

Siblings Australia works in this blind spot. This is not a case for starting something new. It is a case for recognising and connecting something that already works.

Where Thriving Kids already has room for siblings

Thriving Kids' own architecture, read carefully, already has the shape to hold this.

The 'seek and respond' model trains universal services to notice developmental concerns in the child. The same relational practice, delivered by the same trusted professionals, is well placed to notice sibling stress too, if the workforce is trained to look.

The proportionate universalism pyramid (universal, tailored, sustained) maps cleanly onto sibling need: universal information for all sibling-inclusive families, tailored peer support for siblings in higher-stress households, sustained support for siblings who take on caregiving roles, including bereaved siblings and young carers.

Child and Family Hubs, positioned as the 'no wrong door' entry point for Thriving Kids delivery, are a natural home for sibling-specific peer support alongside parenting and targeted supports, not a separate stream requiring its own infrastructure.

The dual-track implementation model (Learning Communities and Statewide Commissioning) offers an immediate entry point: sibling support could be piloted within existing Learning Communities now, ahead of full 2028 rollout, using models Siblings Australia has already proven.

Recommendations

1. **Name siblings explicitly, at every level.**
   State and national Thriving Kids implementation guidance should include "siblings" wherever "parents and carers" appears, consistent with the Department of Health's own definition of family.

2. **Resource Hubs to include sibling support in their core offer.**
   As Hubs become the primary local delivery platform, sibling-inclusive peer support should be funded as part of the 'glue,' not left to individual services to absorb.

3. **Train the universal workforce to notice sibling wellbeing.**
   Seek and respond practice should extend beyond the child with additional needs to the family system around them, including siblings.

4. **Build siblings into the proportionate universalism model.**
   Universal, tailored, and sustained tiers of support should each have a defined sibling pathway, matched to the same principle of support proportionate to need.

5. **Capture sibling outcomes in learning and evaluation.**
   Thriving Kids' evaluation work should measure family-level outcomes that include siblings (and other family/kin), not only the target child.

6. **Enable sibling context to carry forward in education records.**
   With family consent, education systems should consider proportionate, privacy-safeguarded mechanisms to record sibling context within student wellbeing information, so schools can respond earlier and families are not required to re-explain their circumstances at every transition.

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