



Association for
Children with a
Disability

Association for Children with Disability

Submission: Productivity Commission's inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

May 2023

ACD is the leading advocacy service for children with disability and their families in Victoria. We are a not-for-profit organisation led by, and for, families of children with disability.

For more than 40 years we have been advocating to improve the lives of children with disability and their families.

Our vision is that children with disability and their families have the same rights and opportunities as all children and families.

ACD welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care.

For more information contact

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Recommendations

1. Address gaps in pre-service qualifications to give educators and teachers the skills and confidence to support children with disability.
2. Make the process for accessing inclusion support funding easier so children with disability don't miss out.
3. Increase accountability of early childhood education and care services to ensure they are not discouraging or refusing access to children with disability and their families.
4. Improve interface issues between early childhood education and care and the NDIS.
5. Urgently implement the recommendation made in the 2020 report into the Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 to extend the Standards to childcare providers.

1. A disability-confident early childhood workforce

For many families, educators and teachers who prioritised communication and partnerships with families were the key to a successful kindergarten experience.

"Having teachers that 'got' my child, that supported their development [made kindergarten successful]."

Families also spoke about the importance of staff who had prior experience, confidence, and skills in working with children with disability and meeting their individual needs. Anecdotally, existing knowledge and skills of working with children with disability led to more focus on communication and understanding families' invaluable knowledge of their child.

"[It's important to have] staff that listen even if they have experience with disability – every child is different and us parents know our kids [best]."

Conversely, when educators and teachers had limited knowledge and understanding of disability and the importance of working with families, the experience of kindergarten was less positive. For example, families raised concern that educators and teachers were given insufficient pre-service training to be confident in understanding inclusion, and making adjustments that met the needs of individual children. When asked what they would change to make kindergarten better for children with disability, one family noted:

"Better training for staff on disability awareness and accommodations. Staff that can lead families in inclusion, not be trained by families."

Limited workforce knowledge and understanding of disability contributed to challenges for families, who spoke about the risk of all disabilities being seen as alike. Families advocated for more training and understanding that children with disability are as unique and individual as children without disability, with individual needs.

"Educate teachers on disabilities and how all children are different."

Connection and engagement with peers were seen as a key ingredient in making kindergarten a successful experience for families. However, limited understanding about inclusion can lead to exclusion, raising concerns about children's development and engagement with peers.

"More education for staff about what inclusion looks like – it's more than access."

2. Additional funding and reasonable adjustments

Access to individual funded supports and reasonable adjustments for children with disability were seen as other key issues.

Families shared experiences of their child's access to early learning being restricted or reduced after enrolment based on the level of funding their child received for an additional educator or assistant. For example, if a family's child received funding that covered 10 hours for an additional staff member, families were often told their child could only attend for those 10 hours. For some services, the application process was too difficult or time consuming and they told families they wouldn't apply.

"Our first day care wouldn't look at getting my child an aide. Luckily I got into a council run kinder/day care combo and they've got all the funding applications and they've been phenomenal."

Many families contacted ACD seeking advice about difficulties with their child's long day care or kindergarten implementing reasonable adjustments to support their child's participation. Some of these related to toileting supports, lack of visual communication tools particularly for non-verbal children, or implementing strategies to support behaviours of concern. For other families, lack of staff training and workforce shortages impacted their child's attendance.

"I'm currently working in my car while my child is at kinder as the teacher can't have a day away to do diabetes training. This is due to no staff being available and if the teacher is away, kinder is cancelled as there is only one fully trained educator. We are in a rural area too so it's even harder to attract staff."

Families spoke about the emotional and financial pressure it put on them when their child was discouraged from attending or told their child not attend for the full hours. It often meant mothers in particular had to reduce or stop their paid employment.

The interaction between the Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program and Victoria's Kindergarten Inclusion Support program needs to be addressed. Families spoke about the additional burden of having to cobble together applications so their child received enough support to sustain engagement in early learning. Some families shared experiences of being discouraged from applying for sessional kindergarten because the application process for funded supports was too hard and unlikely to result in enough support for the full duration of the program.

"Make the whole Kindergarten Inclusion Support/inclusion funding application process EASIER – it is laborious, the paperwork and meetings and amount of time it takes to get this in place."

Where families did apply for Kindergarten Inclusion Support and did not receive enough funding for an additional assistant for the full 15-hour program, poor interaction with the Inclusion Support Program at a systems level often meant there were gaps in support purely based on whether the Commonwealth or State was the primary funder of that *portion* of the program (e.g. sessional kinder or long day care component). In the end, this lack of collaboration meant children with disability and their families missed out.

3. Experiences of gatekeeping

Too many children with disability and their families are denied access to high-quality early childhood education and care services.

Families of children with disability want their child to attend early childhood education and care to boost their child's developmental outcomes, increase their engagement with peers, and to engage in paid work. However, many families report they haven't been able to access the early learning services they need due to gatekeeping.

Families report the use of a range of tactics to prevent or discourage their child from enrolling or attending a service. Tactics can range from making it clear their child is not welcome, telling families the service can't support their child's needs or don't have the funding to support their child, or limiting the hours a child is able to attend.

"The teacher came up to us as said, 'Now I wouldn't want your child coming here and being disruptive without inclusion funding. So if they come here, you'll have to make sure they have full inclusion funding.' So it was really a gatekeeping practice."

Families also spoke about difficulties accessing outside school hours care, which added further barriers to workforce participation.

Gatekeeping is often a result of limited knowledge, awareness and confidence about disability that can result in poor attitudes from early childhood educators, teachers and providers.

Families highlighted the importance of an early childhood education and care workforce that understood and valued the diversity of disability, had a welcoming attitude, and prioritised good communication with families.

Services denying or discouraging access, issues with inclusion funding and reasonable adjustments, services reducing a child's hours at a service, and transitions to prep are key issues raised by families with ACD's Support Line

4. Working together with NDIS funded services

When early learning services had strong connections with NDIS funded allied health professionals, families spoke positively about their kindergarten experience and the benefits for their child.

Families spoke about the importance of alignment, consistency, and a shared understanding of strategies to support their child's individual needs and goals between allied health, early childhood teachers and educators, and families.

Enabling children and families to access allied health services onsite was important for families, which ensured their child didn't miss out and provided more holistic support.

"The ability to have therapists (physio etc) be able to attend a typical day-care/kinder [made kindergarten successful]."

However, poor interface between early childhood education and care services and the NDIS created barriers for some families in accessing early learning. In particular, when services didn't support a child's NDIS funded therapists to provide services onsite, some families said they had to take their child to too many medical appointments that didn't work around attending early learning.

5. Increase provider accountability

While all early childhood education and care services need to comply with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, families report services continue to refuse services to children with disability. This demonstrates more needs to be done to build the awareness, understanding and accountability of early learning providers so they understand and meet their obligations.

ACD's Support Line has seen an increase in calls relating to early childhood education and care issues of more than 1400 per cent from 2019 to 2022

Further, a recommendation made in the 2020 report of the Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005 to ensure the Standards apply to long day care centres has still not happened.

While families raised concerns about early childhood education and care services delivered by private providers, not-for-profit, community-based and local council run services, anecdotally children with disability and their families are overrepresented in services that aren't for-profit.

As more than 50 per cent of early childhood education and care services are delivered by private for-profit services providers, this raises concerns about whether private providers at a systems level are welcoming children with disability into their services.

Early result from a survey undertaken by ACD show 10 per cent or less of families of children with disability accessed kindergarten through a private provider, even where the kindergarten was part of a long day care centre
