



## **Consultation Submission for development of a National Disability Strategy Beyond 2020**

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation project. As the peak body for community playgroups nationally, we welcome collaborations which further support inclusive play for all, strengthening families and communities for a stronger Australia.

Our submission contains three parts. The first explores the role of playgroups in Australian communities with a focus on our disability specific playgroup activity. The second explores the issues for early childhood and Playgroup, and their place within the new National Disability Strategy. The third provides a response to the specific questions posed within the *National Disability Strategy Position Paper July 2020*.

### **1. Playgroup Australia**

Playgroup Australia is the leading voice for families and caregivers of children under age five. Our vision 'creating a village through play', aims to support learning through play, strengthen parental capacity and wellbeing, and connection within communities for all families.

Playgroup Australia represents the state and territory playgroup organisations (STOs) that deliver support to thousands of playgroups, attended by more than 100,000 Australian families annually. These playgroups reach into almost 80% of Australian postcodes; providing free and low cost early developmental and social support for children, their families and caregivers of all abilities.

In addition, member STOs provide a range services for families living with disability. This includes:

- PlayConnect supported playgroups for children on the Autism spectrum or with neurodevelopmental delay;
- MyTime a peer support program for parents and carers of children 0-16 years with a disability, developmental delay or behavioural concerns.
- PALS Inclusive Playgroups bringing together families with and without disability through a shared interest; and the
- Play Together program, funding inclusion officers across our state and territory network to support families with disability to connect with and participate in inclusive community playgroups.

#### *Positioning Playgroup*

For more than 40 years Playgroup has, and continues to, play a vital role in supporting the early years by offering all children and families a shared community to support the best start to life. As reflected in the AEDC data, playgroup participation has potential to impact positively on a range of outcomes including developmental, health, mental health, education, social isolation, community engagement and parenting capacity<sup>1</sup>. Given its potential to contribute to such diverse outcomes, it is important that playgroup is recognised as a key activity which contributes to a range of policy and program objectives, including future National Disability Strategies.

The vast majority of families access these supports through the traditional community playgroup model, which provides a flexible approach supporting the specific and changing needs of families within their community. However, for many reasons, families living with disability often report community playgroups do not meet their specific needs.

Through the delivery of PlayConnect, and ongoing engagement with NDIS Information, Linkages and Capacity Building projects, Playgroup Australia and our member STOs endeavour to provide a broad range of inclusive play opportunities for these vulnerable families. Together programs provide community connection and peer support, overcoming barriers to access and building inclusive options for community participation for all families.

Unlike many NDIS service providers, these playgroup programs offer a soft entry to the service system including a non-therapeutic, community environment to support families awaiting often lengthy formal diagnosis and treatment. It is important that playgroups continue to provide this service for families living with disability into the future.

## **2. Early years supports within the Disability Strategy**

### *Primacy of the Early Years*

While the evidence is clear that the first five years of a child's life are critical to their development and wellbeing, there is currently no mention of early childhood within the Position Paper. Certainly, meaningful employment for people with disability is crucial but families need to be supported to get to that life stage with a focus on early years (up to age 6) and education.

It is crucial the new disability strategy recognizes the importance of supports in the early years for children and families with disability.

The new disability strategy should include a specific focus, and targeted strategies on early identification, supports, inclusion and community participation in the early years.

### *Individual vs Community Focus*

The rollout, and transition to, the NDIS has not always been smooth for families with young children living with disability. While work is underway to reform early intervention experiences within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), it is vital these learnings are reflected in the new National Disability Strategy.

Of particular note, it is vital that the National Disability Strategy recognises that the NDIS and individual plans are only one part of a more complex picture of the supports that a family with a child/ren with disability require. This broader picture must include community-based activities and programs like playgroup and support young children and families before engagement with formal disability services, and those that may not meet the requirement of diagnosis and NDIS entry.

Furthermore, to increase the efficacy of these community programs, families must be given timely access to necessary supports, without extensive hurdles and barriers. This accessibility is critical to achieving effective early intervention and improved outcomes for children and families across the spectrum of disability.

It is critical that the new National Disability Strategy clearly identifies that access to the NDIS, while crucial, is only one part of a whole of society response to disability.

We note that while progress has varied, investment in non-NDIS related activity under the current disability strategy has not achieved the level of change required. We also recognise that Government focus on NDIS investment has put investment in inclusive community activity at risk. As the NDIS has rolled out, there has been a reduction in the range and number of targeted community activities, with peer group activity funding withdrawn in favour of individual or one-on-one support packages.

While one-on-one support is clearly needed, the addition of peer support and group engagement activities in the early years is critical in breaking down barriers and community isolation, often experienced by families living with disability. Families participating in playgroup reflect on the substantial benefit on wellbeing and behavioural awareness, through shared experiences and community engagements.

Playgroup Australia calls for increased and ongoing investment in activities that increase inclusion, community engagement and health and wellbeing for people with disability and their families in addition to the NDIS system. It is critical that PlayConnect, as well as other supports that are not disability specific, continue to have access to mainstream funding streams.

### *Identifying Gaps*

Many of the families with disability we encounter in the delivery of our programs identify barriers to their engagement in existing mainstream services including a feeling of not being welcome or being judged. A focus on changing community attitudes will go some way to addressing these barriers. However, in addition to these barriers, the families we work with strongly indicate that, while they welcome the opportunity to participate in fully inclusive early childhood activity, such as community playgroups, there is also an overwhelming need for opportunities for engagement with others who have similar experiences or challenges.

Meeting the needs of families with children with disability for inclusion in the early years will not be achieved through a focus on existing mainstream service alone. Families need to be able to access support to build their readiness, confidence and capacity to engage in mainstream community activity. With its member organisations, Playgroup Australia is currently building such a model which provides a spectrum of playgroup options:

- **PlayConnect supported playgroups** enable families with concerns about their child's development to access dedicated playgroups for peer to peer connection, early socialisation and development and a pathway towards diagnosis and NDIS as required
- **PALS inclusive playgroups** enable families with and without disability to share a playgroup experience united by a common interest in a community activity, with support to engage in playgroup and create connections with other families. These playgroups are integrated and intended to act as a transition or steppingstone towards participation in mainstream playgroup and community activity
- **Play Together** building inclusive practice into mainstream community playgroups through training, information and support of Inclusion Officers that work with playgroups to build their capacity to be inclusive as well as families with disability to support their transition into mainstream community playgroups.

By providing this spectrum of options, Playgroup organisations are meeting families where they are at. The spectrum supports families with disability as well as the wider community to create connections and confidence to interact in mainstream settings.

The new disability strategy must be about choice for people with disability, enabling people to access a spectrum of options from fully inclusive, integrated, or specialist depending upon need.

### 3. Response to Questions within Position Paper

#### *Question 1: Vision and Outcome areas*

Playgroup Australia supports an ongoing focus on the six outcome areas identified in the current strategy. In particular, inclusive and accessible communities; personal and community support; learning and skills and health and wellbeing, we welcome ongoing development and continued research to further develop and be innovative in our response to communities.

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#### *Question 2: Guiding Principles*

Overall, the guiding principles are sound, however provide the following feedback:

- While we strongly agree **barriers faced by priority populations** is key, we seek greater clarity around who these priority populations are, and the specific barriers. What evidence informs this?
- A question of hierarchy. Presently, **Support carers and supporters** is the final principle. We would suggest this could be elevated to ensure this support is appropriately valued, and the focus on people with disability and their caregivers given primacy within the strategy. In the early years' context, the support provided to parents/caregivers, and to whole families, is fundamental to good outcomes for the young child.

Playgroup Australia supports the guiding principles.

#### *Question 3: Stronger Emphasis on Improving Community Attitudes*

We agree that a focus on changing community attitudes is fundamental to achieving improved outcomes for people living with disability, with the following feedback:

- We are conscious that change to community attitudes is a long-term goal that will not be fully achieved by a 10-year strategy. Widescale cultural change is required and this requires intensive investment over a generation to achieve sustained change. If this is included in the new National Disability Strategy, it will be critical that this long-term commitment is clear, and that sustained investment is available.
- While we agree meaningful employment opportunities for people with disability are crucial and barriers exist within many workplaces, we recommend a wider focus. The strategy needs to ensure community attitudes about disability are shaped and changed *across the life course* to ensure the broader community welcomes, includes and supports people with disability at all life stages.
- This includes ensuring children with disability, and their families, are engaged in positive and inclusive early community settings (including Playgroup, community activities, day-care etc.) as well as within the education sector. This life course approach provides the greatest opportunity for

sustainable change by building the capacity of the community to be more inclusive and for people with disability to fulfill their individual potential over time.

- The strategy needs to focus on the life journey of a person with a disability and their family factoring in all life stages including prior to adulthood. Accessing earlier intervention, parental wellbeing support and the building of parental capacity is important to achieving positive outcomes for people with a disability. It can help create positive home environments, increase parental confidence in supporting developmental goals, increase safety and security, self-regulation etc. In turn these outcomes support development, education, employment, social, and emotional wellbeing outcomes in adults.
- While we strongly agree improving community attitudes is vital to the success of the strategy, it is important that the funding directed towards this attitudinal change does not negatively impact or compromise the funding of programs run for and by people with disability.

Playgroup Australia cautions that sustained cultural change requires a life course, community-based approach, and is only achieved through a very long-term strategy and appropriate investment.

#### *Question 4: Outlining Government Responsibilities*

While we agree clear lines of responsibility will make accessing supports and services easier, it is vital that these lines of responsibility are clearly communicated to people with disability and linked to relevant services. This communication is the key element for this component of the plan to be effective.

However, history demonstrates that gaps can emerge between jurisdictional responsibilities and this risk must be managed to ensure that service systems do not become fragmented, that the needs of the person with disability remain centered and that coordination between jurisdictional responsibilities is seamless.

While governments value clarity around roles and responsibilities, a family with a young child with disability is primarily focused on being able to access the information and supports that the family and child need regardless of where responsibility lies. It is more important that families experience smooth, timely access to supports through a 'no wrong door' approach than for them to understand where responsibility lies.

Playgroup Australia is concerned that delineation of responsibilities ensures that no gaps emerge which impact on the ability of people with disability and their families accessing the supports they need.

#### *Question 5: How the role of the non-government sector is represented*

The non-government sector has a very significant role to play as the sector is the primary interface that people with disability have when accessing services. There are potential levers that can be utilized (such as via funding contracts or quality assurance processes) that can support implementation of the National Disability Strategy and strengthen accountability.

#### *Question 6: What and when should governments make information available to the public?*

As the key guiding policy framework on disability for Australia, it is important that the National Disability Strategy is well known, well recognized, and reported so that people with disability, indeed all Australians, are aware that it is a priority for governments. If addressing community attitudes is going to be a key action and investment under the strategy, then this becomes even more relevant. The key challenge will be identifying how best to ensure that information is provided which is relevant, accessible and timely.

Playgroup Australia urges the development of a clear and comprehensive communications strategy to accompany the National Disability Strategy and each of the Targeted Action Plans.

#### *Question 7: Targeted Action Plans*

A key learning from the implementation of the last National Disability Strategy was that without investment in key specific and targeted actions, less can be achieved. Playgroup Australia supports the use of Targeted Action Plans, that come with appropriate funding to enable strategies to be implemented.

A Targeted Action Plan for Early Childhood should be a priority under the new strategy.

#### *Question 8: Engagement Plan*

A range of existing engagement opportunities exist through Disability Peoples Organisations and peak bodies as well as through advisory councils appointed by jurisdictional governments. Rather than establish alternative engagement points, effective use of these existing channels should be a priority.

### **Further Feedback**

We understand that an outcomes framework is being developed for the National Disability Strategy and look forward to the opportunity to provide input to that process. Moving from outcomes statements to specific measurable actions can be challenging but is essential to enable impact and change to be measured.

At this stage the position paper lacks clarity around how the Disability Strategy will be actioned and provides no indication of direct funding commitment.

For the strategy to have a real and lasting impact it is vital a funding commitment is made by Governments.

### **Recommendations**

In summary, Playgroup Australia provides the following recommendations and feedback for development of a new National Disability Strategy:

1. It is crucial the new disability strategy recognizes the importance of supports in the early years for children and families with disability.
2. The new disability strategy to include a specific focus, and targeted strategies on early identification, supports, inclusion and community participation in the early years.
3. It is critical that the new National Disability Strategy clearly identifies that access to the NDIS, while crucial, is only one part of a whole of society response to disability.
4. Playgroup Australia calls for increased and ongoing investment in activities that increase inclusion, community engagement and health and wellbeing for people with disability and their families in addition to the NDIS system. It is critical that PlayConnect, as well as other supports that are not disability specific, continue to have access to mainstream funding streams.
5. The new disability strategy must be about choice for people with disability, enabling people to access a spectrum of options from fully inclusive, integrated, or specialist depending upon need.
6. Playgroup Australia supports an ongoing focus on the six outcome areas identified in the current strategy. In particular inclusive and accessible communities; personal and community support;

learning and skills and health and wellbeing, we welcome ongoing development and continued research to further develop and be innovative in our response to communities.

7. Playgroup Australia supports the guiding principles.
8. Playgroup Australia cautions that sustained cultural change requires a live course, community-based approach, and is only achieved through a very long-term strategy and appropriate investment.
9. Playgroup Australia is concerned that delineation of responsibilities ensures that no gaps emerge which impact on the ability of people with disability and their families accessing the supports they need.
10. Playgroup Australia urges the development of a clear and comprehensive communications strategy to accompany the National Disability Strategy and each of the Targeted Action Plans.
11. A Targeted Action Plan for Early Childhood to be a priority under the new strategy.
12. For the strategy to have a real and lasting impact it is vital a funding commitment is made by Governments.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this consultation process. If we can provide any further information please contact Nicole Kee [Nicole.Kee@playgroupaustralia.com.au](mailto:Nicole.Kee@playgroupaustralia.com.au) or (02) 6103 0173.

Yours sincerely



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<sup>i</sup> Gregory, T., Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2017). The reach of Playgroups across Australia and their benefits from children's development: A comparison of 2012 and 2015 AEDC data. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia