



Association for
Children with a
Disability

Association for Children with Disability

Snapshot: Inclusive early learning services for children with disability and their families

April 2023

Background

Association for Children with Disability (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.

In March 2023, ACD held two online consultations with families of children with disability to understand their experience of kindergarten.

This snapshot is a starting point to understanding the kindergarten experiences of children with disability and their families. It provides an overview of what worked for families to create an inclusive kindergarten experience, and highlights areas for improvement.

What makes early learning successful?

1. A disability-confident early childhood workforce

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

"Having teachers that 'got' my child, that supported their development [made early learning 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 early learning 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 key ingredients in making early learning a successful experience for families. It was noted that limited understanding of inclusion can lead to exclusion, raising concerns about children's development and peer engagement.

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

2. Strengthening support

Disability-confident educators and teachers can go a long way to creating inclusive early learning programs for all children and families, not just children with disability. However, some children need additional support to maintain engagement in early learning, beyond the standard resourcing.

Inclusion support programs like the Commonwealth's Inclusion Support Program need to be easy to understand, easy to access, and align with state-based programs. This is particularly important when children are enrolled in sessional kindergarten programs within long day care services.

Victorian families of children with disability raised concerns about the complexities in navigating additional support for their children. For example, one family enrolled in long day care spoke about being discouraged from enrolling their child in a funded sessional kindergarten program, due to difficulties in accessing state-based support for the duration of the sessional kindergarten program.

3. "Whole of setting" approach to inclusion

Families reflected on the importance of good practice shown by early childhood education and care services in meeting their needs and the needs of their children. Families gave examples of good practice such as:

- Making service-wide accommodations to build inclusion for all children
- Individual goals or learning plans for children with disability
- Spaces and activities for sensory regulation
- Continuing to support children and families while absent due to medical and health issues
- Teaching all children how to communicate with non-verbal children
- Timely access to the right adaptive equipment for their child
- Ensuring all services are built in line with Universal Design principles
- Using visual schedules and instructions
- Strong transitions into early learning, and school
- Supporting families, as well as the workforce, to build inclusive attitudes

These limited examples demonstrate the breadth of ways families feel early learning services can demonstrate good, inclusive practices. They also speak to changes needed at a systems level to embed inclusion.

"[It's important that] management understand and promote inclusion – so it all starts from top down to the staff."

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 early learning experience and the benefits for their child.

Families discussed 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 early learning successful]."

5. Choice

Families consistently highlighted choice as an essential element in making early learning successful. Many families highlighted choice as an area they would most like to see change to improve their experience.

Many families want access to a high-quality service of their choice in their local area. For families of children with disability, being able to choose a service can be the difference in whether their child is included or not.

"One kinder was so open they wanted us to come."

Families spoke powerfully about the difference it made in accessing an inclusive service with "amazing staff". Until all services embed inclusion, families of children with disability need access to greater choice of service to ensure their children don't miss out.

"We were very blessed by the kinder we had our [child] attend. We applied through council and were accepted to our preference. The educators were brilliant. They took time to understand our daughter... There were many steps but they were happy to make any adjustments."

For more information contact

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