

# Lifestart Submission to the Early Years Strategy Consultation 2023

Lifestart is a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity based in NSW supporting children and young people aged 0-24 years living with a broad range of developmental delays and disabilities, and their families and carers. We are a registered NDIS service provider, an Early Childhood Partner with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), delivering the Early Childhood Early (EC) Approach, and also deliver targeted services through grant and philanthropic funding. Through these combined programs and activities, Lifestart has supported more than 10,000 children and young people in the past 12 months.

Our response in this submission is targeted to the needs of young children experiencing developmental delay and disability and their families and carers.

## A. Vision

Lifestart's mission, vision and values align with the approach to developing an early years strategy as outlined in the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper ('Discussion Paper').

**We want to see an Australian community where all children and young people belong and thrive.**

## B. Outcomes

Outcomes for all children, including those children with developmental delays and disabilities, should be aligned. These include that:

- All children are healthy, cared for, grow, learn, develop and experience belonging in their community regardless of their geographical location, demographics and ability.
- All children are safe from harm and protected by a system that prevents harm and responds appropriately to risk of harm.
- All children and their families have secure and stable housing.
- All children and their families have sufficient income to support health and wellbeing, including for food, clothing and health needs.
- All children have access to quality early childhood education and school education regardless of geographical location, demographics and ability.
- All children have their cultural diversity promoted and celebrated and are protected from discrimination.
- Families and carers will be supported to give their children the opportunities to achieve all these outcomes. Families who require more supports will be given those supports in order to achieve the same outcomes as for every other Australian child.

In addition, for children with developmental delays and disabilities:

- Freedom from disability discrimination.
- Freedom from a culture of low expectations for their future life, with systems in place that support high expectations.
- Access to the same opportunities as for every other child including participation in mainstream education, sport, performing arts and community access, without facing any barriers to do so.
- Access to the timely targeted supports that may be needed to achieve these outcomes, including but not limited to family support, early childhood intervention, health, disability and community services, financial support, peer support.
- Children who need it will receive high quality early intervention, which is delivered in a holistic, person-centred way and builds the capacity of the family and supports them to be included in their community.

## C. Policy priorities: Children with developmental delays and disabilities

### 1. Inclusion in general

When inclusion does not happen right from the start in the early years, families experience more narrow choices and less opportunities for their child resulting in almost inevitable long-term exclusion and segregation.

Promoting inclusion in the early years is critical because:

- Early experiences are integral to the formation of a child's identity, their sense of belonging and their connection to and inclusion in their world.
- The experiences that a young child with a disability or developmental delay has of inclusion and participation in their early years profoundly affects their life trajectory and life choices through childhood, adolescence and early adulthood.
- The attitudes and behaviours of people who are influential in a family's developing understanding of their child are powerful in shaping expectations for the future and will make a difference as to whether or not a child with a disability is included.

**Recommendation 1: That the priorities of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 relevant to the Early Years be articulated within the policy frameworks of the Early Years Strategy.**

### 2. Inclusion in education

Inclusion in education settings has a profound impact on the life trajectory of children with disabilities, setting the foundation for what future participation and inclusion may look like. Inclusive education is a fundamental human right that has been enshrined in international conventions to which Australia is a signatory.

Quality early childhood education plays a critical role in the development of all children however it is well recognised through National and State data that children with disabilities,

as well as children from other diverse backgrounds, are underrepresented in early childhood education and care settings.

There is a large and consistent body of research evidence over the past 50 years demonstrating the positive outcomes of inclusive education for students both with and without disabilities (for example, see Cologon, 2019 and Hehir et al, 2016) when compared with segregated settings. Children with disabilities who have participated in mainstream education go on to achieve greater participation later in life including independent housing, employment and contributing as valued members of their communities.

Inclusive school education sets a positive life course for ongoing inclusion, participation, contribution and a sense of belonging. Promoting inclusion in education requires government and community commitment to a reform agenda in education. The Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education (ACIE) has provided a practical roadmap for how this can be achieved. [Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia](#) outlines a 10-year plan for achieving this outcome, based on 6 key evidence-based pillars.

**Recommendation 2: Policy priorities for education in Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031 form part of the Early Years Strategy.**

**Recommendation 3: All children, including those with disabilities or developmental concerns, have free and equitable access to quality, inclusive early childhood education.**

**Recommendation 4: All governments commit to a reform agenda that promotes inclusive education for all children through policy and resourcing.**

**Recommendation 5: Education services are appropriately resourced and equipped to welcome and include children with disability.**

### **3. Improved coordination between the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other Commonwealth and State Early Years services, policies and initiatives.**

While the NDIS can achieve positive benefits for children with disabilities, the way it has been established and implemented has had unintended negative consequences for the service system landscape and support systems of children and families. The intended outcomes of the NDIS, along with its long-term sustainability, cannot be achieved for children without investment in, and coordination between, Commonwealth and State funded health, education, community and other services.

The current NDIS review is considering the Early Childhood approach under the NDIS and the integration that may be needed between the NDIS and universal and mainstream systems.

**Recommendation 6: Early Years Strategy policies consider the outcomes of the NDIS Review and intersection with the Strategy.**

#### 4. Refugees and immigration status

Many young children and their families are falling through the cracks and experiencing significant disadvantage due to their visa status. Many do not have access to benefits such as Centrelink Family Tax Benefit, Job Seeker, Child Care Subsidy, Medicare and the NDIS. In addition, many families who have a child with developmental concerns or disabilities do not wish to seek formal Early Intervention supports due to a fear that this would negatively impact their application for Permanent Residency.

Children are therefore unable to access the range of opportunities critical for their health, development and wellbeing including early education, specialist early intervention, equipment and family support. This is a fundamental breach of their human rights.

**Recommendation 7: Policies specifically include the access of children on a range of visas to free or affordable services, including disability supports.**

#### D. Principles

Lifestart supports the following principles in the Strategy:

- Human rights approaches
- Inclusion
- Child and family centred
- Child voice
- Strengths-based
- Evidence-based
- High expectations
- Principles embedded in the Early Years Learning Framework

#### Contact person for this submission

Further information about this submission can be obtained by contacting:

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#### References

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