

TO: EARLY YEARS STRATEGY COMMITTEE

WRITTEN BY: Xanthi Kouvas, Mum to autistic daughter.

Hello,

As a mum to a delightful, very perceptive, high energy and extremely funny 4 ½ year old daughter who is autistic, I am passionate about autistic children having access to opportunities to develop and thrive during their early formative years. The time when ninety per cent of human brain development happens.

My daughter was diagnosed as autistic when she was 2 ½ years of age. She was non-speaking, had many sensory issues and behaved differently to her peers. Consequently, we commenced early intervention therapy when her "at risk" status was identified. (Many appreciative thanks to the life-changing NDIS). My daughter now speaks - based on a recent assessment, she has communication skills like her peers. A fantastic development considering she only started speaking 15 months ago. We also have a far better understanding of how to manage her sensory issues to minimise her feeling overwhelmed. Although still 'quirky' and undeniably different, my daughter is learning how to seek out her tribe of welcoming souls without having to hide or change who she is.

Although eternally grateful for the therapies funded by the NDIS, clinical intervention is not the sole factor responsible for my daughter's encouraging development to date. The strategies developed within early intervention therapy provide a framework for what to do, but to be effective they need to be implemented day in and day out in a variety of contexts (home, pre-school, playgroups, playgrounds etc). Pre-school is THE pre-eminent environment for young children to interact with peers and other (trained) adults, thus developing all-important communication and social skills. Autistic children require more assistance, more modelling and more practice to develop said communication and social skills. Let's give them these vital, frequent opportunities to observe and practice by making pre-school universal for all autistic children.

It is no exaggeration to state that attending pre-school is the best early intervention therapy my daughter received. It is not sufficient to just do 2-3 hours of clinical therapy - in order to foster my daughter's development I would spend 15-20 hours a week with her executing strategies at home, in the park, anywhere I could. No environment however comes close to pre-school in terms of providing supervised, peer-to-peer interactions. For parents and carers of autistic children, pre-school is not necessarily about the ability to return to work – it's about providing a safe, inclusive, peer filled environment for our children to learn skills that do not come naturally to them but which the neurotypical designed world expects them to have. Pre-school is also the environment for preparing autistic children for school, an environment which unfortunately proves to be challenging. (Making schools truly inclusive is a whole other BIG topic). Autistic children will experience life-changing benefits if there is a consolidated, holistic view of the NDIS Early Intervention Programme and Early Childhood Education. These should be integrated and viewed with a whole of child perspective, not work in silos.

We are fortunate to have a very supportive pre-school, but possibly other autistic children do not. Neurodiverse affirming training should be compulsory for all early childhood educators and all pre-schools should have a compulsory neurodiverse affirming inclusive programme. Let's help these valuable people in our children's lives be better informed and prepared. (And pay childhood educators more! They are worth it!).

Returning to the topic of early intervention therapies, it is not unusual to be on a waitlist for months – years even - for good therapists. This results in a loss of valuable therapy time that delays development during the formative early years. Programmes have been developed to promote the study of STEM subjects at schools – can we do the same to promote more valuable allied health workers such as speech therapists and occupational therapists?

My submission is not full of facts and research, as I assume that government departments and personnel have this type of data readily at their disposal. Instead it is the lived experience of a mum who – like most mums – wants to provide the best environment and opportunities for her child to thrive. I have specifically referenced the autistic experience as it is the only experience I have – it is however highly likely that my experience is similar to other families who have children with additional needs.

The world is designed by and for neurotypical people and there is unfortunately a lifelong penalty for neurodivergent people. We have the opportunity to start at the very beginning to better equip our youngest neurodivergent citizens for the years ahead by providing universal access to pre-school, having neurodiverse affirming programmes in pre-schools and ensuring adequate numbers of allied health professionals.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. I am more than happy to talk further about this if required.

Sincerely,

Xanthi Kouvas.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]