



National Autism Strategy

Early Start Australia Discussion Paper Response

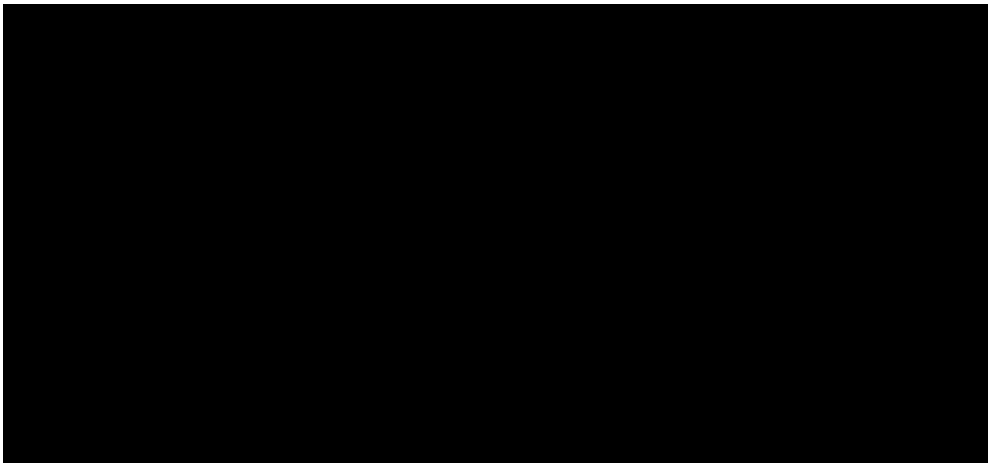
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Photography

Photographs used in this document are for illustration only and should not be interpreted to mean that any person or organisation whose assets are shown in them endorses this document.

Statement on Language

People use different words to talk about autism, and each person will have their own way of talking about autism and about themselves. Some people in the autistic community like to use 'autistic person' (identity-first language), some like to say 'person with autism' (person-first language), and some are fine with using either. ESA is using identity-first language to talk about the National Autism Strategy. This means that we will usually use the term autistic person or autistic people.



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About Early Start Australia

Early Start Australia (ESA) is a large national paediatric therapy organisation enabling better lives by creating brighter futures for children, their families and the community. We work with families to optimise the development of children, adolescents and young adults helping them to achieve their potential by supporting the development of physical, communication, cognitive, sensory, social, and emotional skills.

Our vision is a world where all children reach their potential and find their place in a community that respects and values diversity. Our mission is to deliver evidence-based early intervention and therapy services that support children and families to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

Starting in 2018 as a few small clinics scattered across Australia, we are now more than 500 passionate allied health professionals working across multidisciplinary teams operating from 52 clinics across all Australian states and territories. Our staff are qualified across a range of disciplines including psychology, occupational therapy, speech pathology and physiotherapy, and have undergone additional training to provide best practice intervention and assessment services to young children experiencing developmental delays.

We are dedicated to improving the lives of children and their families around Australia. Since 2018 we have supported more than 28,000 children and their families to maximise their potential, including 8,812 in the last year.¹



¹ Internal data for FY23

About our services

Our passionate and experienced teams work with children and their families to help them achieve their growth and development goals. We provide services in a variety of settings, including our clinics, schools, early learning centres, homes, and community settings.

We focus on supporting children to develop communication, motor, cognitive, social, and emotional skills. We also provide therapy supports for children with neurodevelopmental disorders, developmental delay, or disability, including those on the autism spectrum.

We work closely with families to navigate complex funding and support systems and achieve their goals. We liaise and advise with government and stay connected with research leaders and partners to inform our practice. We recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to autism services and supports, as individuals on the autism spectrum vary widely in developmental abilities and support needs².

We tailor our interventions to meet the unique needs of each child and their family.



² [David Trembath Publications | Griffith University; Interventions for children on the autism spectrum: A systematic umbrella review | Autism CRC](#)

Introduction

ESA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion on Australia's National Autism Strategy. As a provider working in the paediatric therapy space with children with neurodevelopmental disorders, developmental delay, or disability, including autism spectrum disorder, we are passionate about ensuring that all children have access to the supports they need to reach their potential and find their place in a community that respects and values neurodiversity.

We agree that Australia should hold the highest ambitions and aspirations for all autistic people, their families, and kin. We see firsthand the power of intervention in the early years in positively influencing a child's development and their pathway right through to adulthood, supporting and developing a child's sense of identity, health and wellbeing, learning, safety, and happiness.

Our contribution is based on our unique vantage point in the ecosystem.

As a private, multi-disciplinary allied health provider working with children with disability or with developmental concerns we are often the first interaction children and families might have as they start to explore the services and supports available to help when they have concerns with their child's developmental progress.

We work across policy and program silos, seeing firsthand how difficult coordination between programs, funding, and frameworks can be and how hard it is for families to navigate a clear pathway to access the optimal supports for their neurodivergent family member's needs.

ESA applauds the government's commitment to collaborating with people with disabilities, communities, businesses, and the non-government sector to implement the National Autism Strategy and achieve its vision for an inclusive Australian society where people with disabilities can reach their full potential as equal members of the community.

What should the National Autism Strategy achieve

ESA sees a successful National Autism Strategy applied consistently across all States and Territories alleviating challenges and barriers which exist between these geographic regions, offering a clear pathway for families, mapped out in a way that is simple to understand.

Autistic people must be empowered to participate in all aspects of life and community, fully and actively, including economic, social, political, and cultural spheres.

ESA supports a strategy that works towards genuine social inclusion ensuring autistic people are valued and respected members of the community, and that they have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in, and enjoy all aspects of life.

To support individuals, the strategy should:

- Focus on early identification and support.
- Be based on researched evidence of best practice.
- Provide choice and control for the client and family on the type of therapy service they need.
- Offer an understanding of Autism and other co-occurring conditions.
- Affirm neurodiversity.
- Embed services in mainstream settings in an inclusive, welcoming manner.

- Build capacity for individuals, families, and communities.
- Be integrated and not isolating, providing pathways of support for different life stages and needs.
- Involve families and communities in decision-making.
- Respect the experiences of childhood.
- Bridge medical and social models and provide a holistic, unfragmented, lifespan approach.
- Focus on functional outcomes beyond diagnosis.
- Be culturally safe and accessible for First Nations, and people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Creating a better approach to diagnosis, services and supports

ESA believe firmly in the five pillars of success for families: timing, access and equity, navigation, and national consistency.

Timing | Access | Equity | Navigation | Consistency

Timing: Early intervention is most effective in shaping outcomes and optimising the effects of interventions. The most effective interventions occur during the first 1000 days of life. If a gap in development emerges by age 5, it is likely to remain. The data shows earlier intervention provides longer term outcomes for the child and is cost effective. Screening tools such as the ASQ:SE-2, or Ages & Stages Questionnaire, Social-Emotional Second Edition, and the Social Attention and Communication Surveillance (SACS) can be administered at 6-12 months indicating early signs of autism in babies and toddlers.

Access & Equity: Equitable access to early intervention is important for all children, but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are many barriers to accessing early intervention services, including lack of financial resources, health issues, language barriers, and lack of knowledge about available services. Increasing awareness and education about early intervention services is essential to improving access. Services should be embedded within the community and collaboration between service providers should be improved.

Navigation: Early intervention services can be fragmented and difficult to navigate, with no clear path for families to access them. Current systems assume that families have the knowledge and skills to navigate the system, which is often not the case. Centralised and easy-to-navigate referral and connection processes would improve access for all parents and carers, removing barriers to entry that can lead to delayed intervention.

National Consistency: Australia currently lacks a nationally consistent approach to screening across all childhood development. This leads to disparities in screening rates and access to early interventions. A targeted, national approach to holistic screening would positively impact access and equity in interventions. It would also help to identify trends in developmental delays or disabilities across different populations or geographic areas.

To improve diagnosis, services and supports for autistic people ESA sees these strategies as vital:

- Implement Nationally consistent diagnostic practices. This will ensure people with neurodevelopmental conditions are diagnosed consistently, regardless of where they live in Australia.
- Provide navigational supports to help people access high-quality service providers. This could include things like directories of service providers and information on how to choose a service provider.
- Develop an accreditation process for all providers delivering services. This will help to ensure that all service providers are meeting a certain standard of quality.
- Update resources to reflect neurodiversity-affirming concepts and terminology. This means using language that is respectful and inclusive of people with all types of brains.
- Invest in upskilling clinicians to build competence and support to transition to neurodiversity-affirming practice. Clinicians need to be trained on how to provide services in a way that is respectful and supportive of neurodiversity.

Opportunities for the Federal Government to invest in social infrastructure:

- Universal screening of all young children for developmental concerns, e.g., ASQ:SE-2, SACS, PEDI-CAT.
- Assessments standardised and at no cost to families (if they meet a screener for participation).
- Simple pathways for families to navigate to receive services with support from skilled intermediaries.
- Consistent outcome measurements, ensuring all children receiving support achieve milestones such as school readiness or other relevant goals.
- Funding for collaboration between stakeholders in the child's life ensuring all necessary supports are received and less fall through the cracks, e.g., Allied Health Providers & Education Settings
- Workforce training ensuring all professionals in a child's life are equipped to provide the necessary screening & supports, e.g., Social Attention and Communication Study (SACS) training.
- Focus on the Joy of childhood: strategies and vision that recognises the joy of childhood, expresses the positive outcomes that arise when children are safe, loved, nurtured, protected, and enjoyed.

The vital role of early diagnosis

The challenges of waitlists for suitable diagnostic assessment are well known. A thorough differential diagnostic process with trained professionals remains important due to the significant problems that occur from missed and mis-diagnosis.

The importance of early diagnosis is well-established as it leads to early interventions, supports and adaptations that improve developmental outcomes. However, the challenges of diagnosis do not preclude the ease of early identification. Early identification, rather than diagnosis, can lead to the same early intervention, supports, adaptations and developmental and longer-term outcomes.

Developmental surveillance models, such as the Social Attention and Communication Study (SACS) are well-validated and have been effectively implemented across the community in Victoria. The National Autism Strategy can provide the benefits of early identification and supports through national implementation of developmental surveillance, such as with the SACS tool.

Diagnosis of autism can provide the opportunity for self-understanding, self-acceptance, and acceptance by others. However, autism is a neurodevelopmental variation, not a disorder. As such, diagnosis alone does not capture the individual clinical and functional needs of each autistic person.

Individualised and thorough clinical and functional assessment is essential to understand and support the unique needs of each autistic child and young person beyond the diagnostic label of autism. For example, assessment may focus on communication, ADHD, executive functioning, learning, sensory, mental health, or general health needs.

When assessment looks beyond symptoms to comprehensive clinical and functional needs, it provides an opportunity for the best individualised understanding and support plan early on. These assessments can be supported by experienced allied health practitioners at any stage from identification.

Early identification and support

Early Start Australia believes strongly in early identification and support provision to ensure autistic people, their families and communities are best set-up to thrive in their community across all stages of life. To best do this, we believe strongly the strategy should focus on early identification and support. Possible mechanisms to achieve this include:

- Consistent, accessible (online) resources and information for families and health providers.
- A list of early signs or characteristics to assist parents in knowing when to seek support.
- Early access to trained professionals to observe children, develop baseline measures, and provide parent coaching.
- Development of early identification and awareness of autism in First Nations and remote communities.
- Better awareness of autism in tertiary degrees with community overlap such as teaching, health, and medicine.

Consistent assessment and clear next steps

Early Start Australia sees first-hand the challenges that arise when there is a lack of national consistency across service provision for families, and how individuals, families and communities benefit when there are clear, nationally consistent mechanisms for accessing services and supports in place. Possible mechanisms to improve assessment and pathways for autistic people include:

- Consistent assessment and screening tools across the country.
- Easily accessible, compassionate team-based assessment for diagnosis with clear recommendations on where and how to seek support.
- Consistent evaluation of needs not reliant on advocacy by families.
- Guidelines on the identification and support of autism as separate from other developmental concerns.
- Review of criteria for accessing funded supports to ensure that autism is not a "catch-all" diagnosis.

Clear funding pathways

Establishing clear funding pathways is essential to ensuring that individuals in need of support, particularly autistic individuals, can access the resources they require. Clarity in funding pathways simplifies the process for both individuals and service providers, reducing confusion and ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently. This clarity also helps prevent unnecessary delays and obstacles in securing financial support for autistic individuals. Clear funding pathways provide a framework for transparent allocation and utilisation of resources.

- Quick and uncomplicated access to funding.
- Tailored, simple to access support for individuals from disadvantaged cohorts.

Immediate supports

Data shows earlier intervention provides longer term outcomes for the child and is cost effective. Possible mechanisms to avoid delays in access to supports include:

- Accessible education for parents and caregivers on immediate strategies that can be implemented at the time of early identification and post-diagnosis.
- Early childhood education and care settings: Schools, kindergartens providing consistency of support via centralised national training.
- Development of a national resource explaining and presenting a range of evidence-based approaches in an accessible format accompanied by education and training of professionals to deliver these approaches.
- Investment in toolkits, resources, and capacity building initiatives in specific community settings.

A focus on outcomes

Early Start Australia believes it is imperative that any intervention, service or support delivered must be effective. To ensure service effectiveness is forefront, the strategy could:

- Focus on functional outcomes with simple evaluation.
- Ensure the focus is on practical service delivery rather than following administratively burdensome processes.
- Focus on the upskilling of service providers to deliver strategies to enhance social inclusion.
- Increased availability of programs to support socialisation and prevent loneliness and mental health issues.

Culturally safe environment

Early Start Australia believes services should be culturally safe and responsive and employ mechanisms to support this aim such as:

- Increased education about cultural safe and accessible practices to support autistic First Nations and people and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Valuing First Nations kinship systems and promoting community and family system supports.
- Greater representation of diverse individuals in government advertising including autistic people.

Moving towards genuine social inclusion

ESA sees the focus of a social inclusion strategy centred on **genuine inclusion**; a focus on the genuine inclusion of autistic people in mainstream settings, such as education and employment that genuinely encourages and values their participation.

Genuine Inclusion means that autistic people are valued and respected members of the community, and that they have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in, and enjoy all aspects of life.

Autistic people should be able to access the same services and supports as everyone else, without having to go through a separate system.

Autistic people should be able to participate in community activities and events without having to be worried about being discriminated against or excluded.

Autistic people should be able to live their lives in the way they want to, without having to conform to neurotypical expectations.

Support and improve genuine inclusion

ESA believes the strategy should improve genuine inclusion, which could be achieved through:

- Investing in community capacity in mainstream services and supports.
- Designing built environments to better support the needs of autistic people.
- Ensuring service delivery models are responsive to individual needs.
- Implementing legislation that requires organisations to meet a set of standards that include neurodiversity and establish a regulatory body to oversee the implementation and enforcement of this legislation.

Improve attitudes and understanding

ESA believes the strategy should improve community attitudes, and understanding of autism, which could be achieved through:

- Investment in tertiary training for teachers, allied health, medical and supporting services.
- Investment in education for the public on autism.
- Investment in programs that assist to de-stigmatise autism, recognising it as part of the diversity across all people.
- Teaching all Australians how to better recognise individuals with autism and encourage active supports.
- Education provided in the context of cultural diversity.
- Build understanding, acceptance, and adaption within education settings. This could involve training staff and students on autism, creating inclusive classroom environments, and providing individualised support to autistic students.

Greater visibility of autistic people

Autistic people need to become more visible in public life, helping to break down stereotypes and prejudice. Promoting autistic people into positions of leadership, and increase visibility by appointing autistic people to government advisory groups and boards, and by showcasing the achievements of autistic people in government publications and on social media would help improve the visibility of autistic people in our communities.

Improved economic inclusion

Enhanced economic inclusion for autistic people implies that they have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in education, the workforce, and to achieve financial security.

Opportunities to improve education outcomes for autistic people

Inclusive education for autistic people is essential for success later in life, including economic participation. It provides the opportunity to learn alongside neurotypical peers, developing foundational skills for higher education and the workforce, and engagement in extracurricular activities.

Early Start Australia sees value in providing training for teachers and other staff on autism. This will help them to understand the needs of autistic students and how to support them in the classroom. Programs such as

the South Australian Government's Autism Inclusion Teacher (AIT) being appointed in every public primary school (including reception to year 12 schools) could be applied nationally.

Early Start Australia also sees value in creating inclusive classroom environments. This could involve things like providing quiet spaces, allowing students to take breaks as needed, varied seating options, and using visual supports.

Developing nationally consistent individualised learning plans (ILPs) for autistic students could also support their learning needs. ILPs should be developed in collaboration with the student, their parents, and their teachers. They should outline the student's individual needs and goals, and how the school will support them in achieving those goals.

Providing access to specialised support services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and social skills groups within the school environment could also improve learning outcomes of autistic children.

Finally promoting understanding and acceptance of autism among students and staff through school-wide assemblies, workshops, videos, and other educational activities could improve participation and success in learning for autistic children.

Employment inclusion

Although our services are primarily for young children, we also support adults with autism and their families as they age, and their therapy needs change. We can help clients with employment-related goals or skills that will assist them in finding and maintaining a job.

Because of the close bonds that often form between our therapists and clients, some clients and families stay in touch with us even after they have ceased therapy and transitioned to mainstream services and supports. This gives us a unique window into the importance of employment for autistic people.

We have seen firsthand the many benefits that employment can offer autistic people, including financial security, social connection, improved self-worth, and a sense of pride for parents. We believe that the foundation for these benefits is in early intervention, therapy, and supports. By providing autistic children with the skills and supports they need to succeed, we can help them reach their full potential and live fulfilling lives.

Sharing Employment Stories from Early Start Australia

Sarah is a remarkable writer, illustrator, and artist from the heart of rural Western Australia. As a young woman with ASD, Sarah's flair for art and storytelling gives her a unique platform to celebrate her creativity and connection to nature.

At present, Sarah is developing a captivating series of stories featuring her beloved Outback Bush Buddies, inspired by the real-life pets, animals, and wildlife she encounters every day that enrich her life. Sarah's work is not only a testament to her artistic prowess, but also a window into her distinctive world view.

ESA has been fortunate to embark on a meaningful and rewarding commercial partnership with Sarah. This collaboration has resulted in the creation and delivery of:

- Four exquisite and exclusive artworks, thoroughly incorporated into ESA collateral including Welcome Cards for new Employees and Milestone cards for the work anniversaries of the entire ESA workforce.
- A captivating set of drawings that are used in internal and external marketing collateral serving as a testament to the power of inclusion.

- A one-of-a-kind artwork to support a colouring competition for our Telethon Charity Trail participation in 2023.

A selection of Sarah's delightful illustrations is seen pictured below.



TM Vending is a small business owned and operated by two brothers with disabilities, Thomas (T) and Mitch (M) in South Australia. Thomas and Mitch are young men who enjoy lining up, matching, and identifying differences in objects. They live with their mother and are supported by two carers each in the community.

TM Vending was developed by their mother, who wanted to provide her sons with employment opportunities after they finished school and recognised their unique skills and abilities. She helped them practice the skills they would need to run a vending machine business for several years at home before introducing their first vending machines at a local community centre.

At first, Thomas and Mitch would visit the community centre each week with their carers to restock the vending machines, clean the doors, and practice social greetings, such as saying hello and goodbye and handing over invoices to the admin staff. They would also recycle the empty cans by taking them home to sort.

Today, TM Vending has vending machines in a variety of businesses in South Australia, including nursing homes and YMCA sites. While Thomas and Mitch's medical conditions can sometimes impact their ability to work on-site, they have sustained the learning from their experiences and transferred this to other aspects of the business at home, such as packing the shelves in their shed where products are stored.

The team at ESA and other clients value the range of cold drinks offered by TM Vending. Additionally, many young clients and their families report feeling a sense of support knowing that TM Vending is a business owned and operated by people with disabilities. One of their vending machines is seen pictured here with Alison Copley, ESA Practice Principal, and Hon Emily Bourke MLC, Assistant Minister for Autism SA.



Culturally responsive approach

We hope the strategy can develop culturally relevant tools to support accurate diagnosis within the context of the person's culture. This means developing diagnostic tools that are sensitive to the cultural differences of autistic people, and that involve the person's family and community in the diagnostic process.

ESA's indigenous families in the Top End

As an example, ESA has been privileged to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to understand their cultural beliefs and practices around autism. This has been achieved through consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, community leaders, and families of autistic people. The engagement assists practitioners better understand cultural factors that can influence the presentation of autism, as well as the cultural barriers that can prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from accessing diagnosis and support.

Through this relationship, ESA is now providing in-community services in Tenant Creek, Milikapiti, Wurrumiyanga, Jabiru and Daly River and have successfully recruited identified positions to support these roles within the communities.

The National Autism Strategy can further support investment in a culturally sensitive approach to remote community service delivery by providing collaboration between the federal government, state and territory governments, primary health networks (PHNs), and local communities.

It takes a village to raise a child

The National Autism Strategy should consider implementing more team-based screening, assessments and supports, involving a team of professionals with diverse expertise in the identification, assessment, and support of autistic people, including the person's family and community members.

The wider family network should be considered as a source of information to support accurate diagnosis and service needs. Autistic people may be part of a close-knit family network, and it is important to gather information from family members when making a diagnosis and developing a support plan.

Family members of autistic people play a vital role in the diagnostic process. They can provide valuable information about the person's development and behaviour, and they can be instrumental in supporting the person and their loved ones after diagnosis. However, the diagnostic process can be stressful and confusing for family members, and they may need additional support to navigate the process successfully.

The National Autism Strategy should consider way to better support family members in the diagnostic process. It is important to provide families clear and concise information about autism, and the diagnostic process. This information should be translated into multiple languages and adapted for different cultural contexts.

Family members should be offered the opportunity to ask questions, and even seek supports from other family members of autistic people through recognised peer support networks. This could be facilitated online, through social media platforms, groups and individual support services for family members who are struggling to cope with the diagnostic process. These services should be provided at minimal cost, with financial assistance available to cover the cost of screening and diagnostic processes removing financial barriers to support.

Strength-based approach and individualised care

Autism is not a weakness. It is a neurodevelopmental variation that affects how people process information and interact with the world around them. Autistic people have unique strengths and talents and make significant contributions to society. It is important to remember it is a spectrum, meaning that people with autism experience it in different ways.

Focus on abilities

Strengths-based assessments should be provided, focusing on the person's strengths and abilities rather than their deficits. This approach builds on the belief that autistic people have unique strengths and talents and ensures that the person's support plan is tailored to their individual needs and goals.

Early Start Australia utilises a range of standardised assessments in the screening and assessment of autism, and preparation of individual support plans. Common across all strength-based assessments are the areas of focus for clinicians including:

- Communication and language abilities
- Cognition and learning
- Social skills
- Sensory processing
- Emotional regulation
- Executive functioning
- Creativity and innovation
- Interests and hobbies

Strengths-based assessment is important as it helps to shift the focus away from the person's deficits and towards their strengths. This can help to boost the person's self-esteem and confidence. Strengths-based assessment can help to identify the person's interests and talents, which can inform the development of educational and vocational programs and ensure that the person's support plan is tailored to their individual needs and goals.

Sensitivity to trauma

Applied with sensitivity, the strengths-based approach can also be tailored to the needs of people who have experienced trauma. Trauma can be defined as any experience that is overwhelming or distressing, and it can have a significant impact on a person's emotional, physical, and psychological well-being.

Autistic people are more likely to experience trauma than the general population. This is due to a number of factors, including, increased vulnerability to sensory overload, difficulties with communication and social isolation.

Autistic people often have heightened sensitivity to sights, sounds, smells, and other sensory stimuli. This can make them more vulnerable to being overwhelmed and traumatised by sensory experiences. Autistic people may have difficulty communicating their needs and experiences, which can make it difficult for them to get help and support after experiencing trauma. We also see autistic people are often socially isolated, which can make it difficult for them to find support from others after experiencing trauma.

Working to support the unique needs of autistic people can be both strength's based and trauma informed, through a focus on the following principles:

- Ensuring the person's safety and well-being are the top priorities.
- Demonstrate the person has control over their own care and is empowered to make choices about their treatment.
- Collaborate with the person in the development and implementation of their care plan.
- Invest the time and effort to ensure the person feels safe and trusted by their care providers.
- Ensure all care providers are aware of the impact of trauma on autistic people and take steps to minimise the risk of re-traumatisation.

Compassionate, informed care is essential for ensuring that autistic people who have experienced trauma can receive the support they need to heal and thrive.

Health and Mental Health

Autistic people are more likely to experience mental health issues than the general population. For example, autistic people are significantly more likely to die by suicide than those who are not autistic, and they have higher prevalence of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

It is unknown exactly why the prevalence is so much higher in autistic people, however there are a number of factors that may contribute to the higher prevalence of mental health issues in autistic people. These include:

- **Bullying and discrimination:** autistic people are more likely to be bullied and discriminated against, which can lead to social isolation, low self-esteem, and mental health problems.
- **Sensory sensitivities:** autistic people may have sensory sensitivities that make it difficult to cope with everyday activities. This can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health problems.
- **Communication challenges:** autistic people may have difficulty communicating with others, which can lead to misunderstandings and frustration. This can also lead to social isolation and mental health problems.
- **Masking:** autistic people may mask their autistic traits in order to fit in. This can be emotionally draining and lead to mental health problems.
- **Lack of support:** autistic people may not have access to the support they need to cope with the challenges of autism and everyday life. This can lead to stress, anxiety, and other mental health problems.

There is also a high incidence of co-occurring mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, gender dysmorphia and others.

These conditions can lead to a poor quality of life, and for some people can even be life threatening. Screening and subsequent treatment for these conditions should be more readily available for autistic people.

Treatment should be offered early, be collaborative, and integrate existing supports and support systems for a holistic approach.

The National Autism Strategy can help address this by strategies that support:

- Neurodivergence acceptance and adaptations in education
- Neurodivergence acceptance adaptations in employment
- A strong focus on employment, economic and community participation for autistic people, in particular autistic school leavers

Mental health diagnoses in autistic people are often missed and conversely autism is often missed in those presenting to mental health services for both acute and chronic presentations.

Ways the National Autism Strategy can assist in addressing these issues include:

Autism training for health professionals

The National Autism Strategy can help address this by increasing training for health and mental health professionals at the tertiary and professional level, as well screening of mental health with autistic people presenting to health services and screening for autism in those presenting with mental health needs.

Support for families

The strategy should provide autistic people and their families with information and support on mental health. This could include resources on identifying and managing mental health problems, as well as information on accessing mental health services.

Advocacy

The strategy should advocate for government policies and services that support the mental health of autistic people. This could include increased funding for mental health services, as well as greater access to mental health professionals who are trained in autism.

Conclusion

Early Start Australia is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion on a National Autism Strategy.

We fully support the government's commitment to delivering better life outcomes for autistic people through a more targeted and coordinated policy approach that increases their full and inclusive participation in all aspects of life and community.

We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the government to achieve these objectives.



earlystart
AUSTRALIA