Communities for Children (C4C):

A response to the Australian Government proposal for a new approach to programs for children and families

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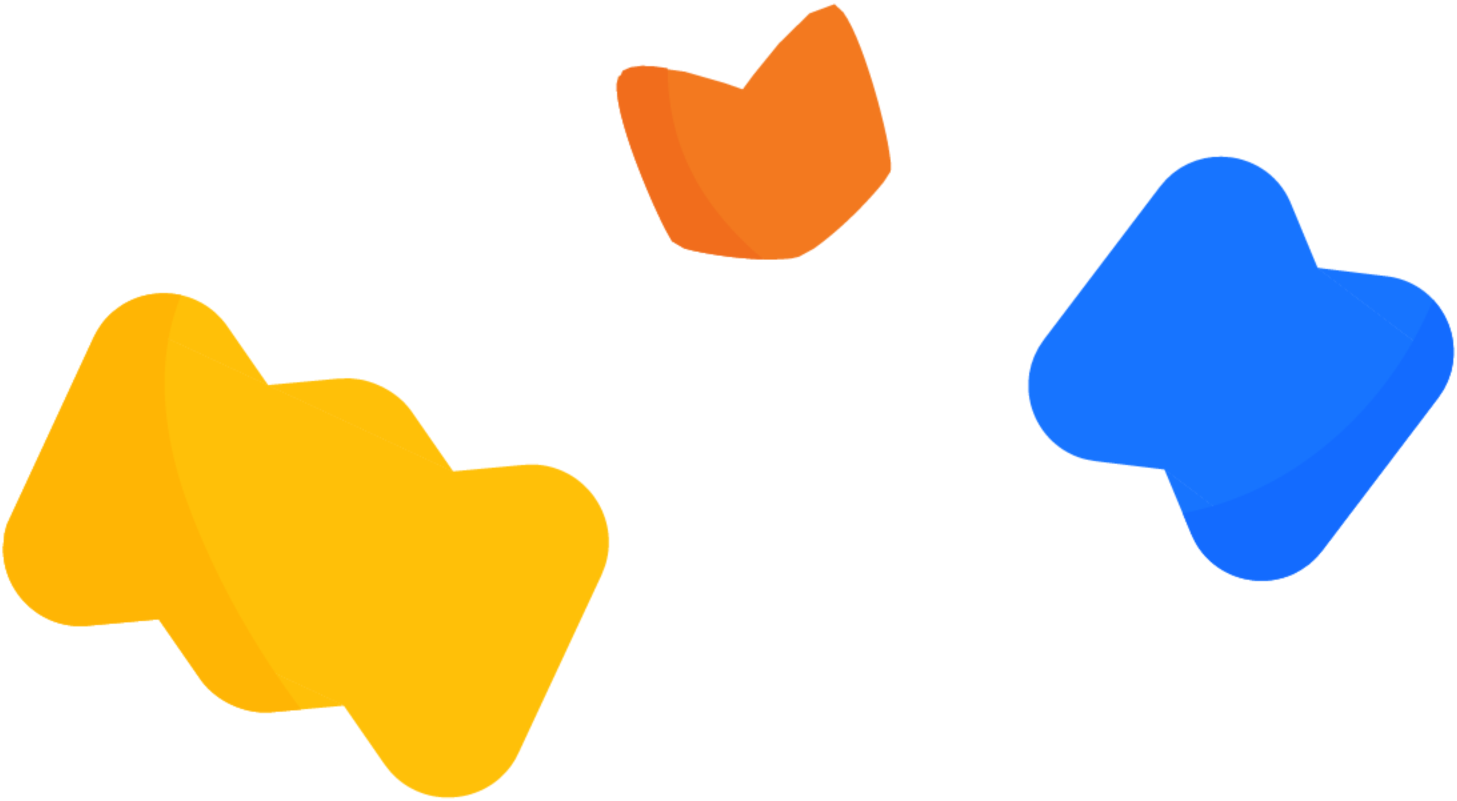

Communities for Children (C4C):

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About Noah's Ark Inc

In 1971, following the end of routine institutionalisation, Noah's Ark Inc was founded by parents of children with disabilities, united by a mission to support families like their own. For over 50 years, Noah's Ark has focused on young children, playing an increasingly significant role in early childhood intervention and inclusion within early childhood services. The organisation has been a sector leader, notably introducing the Key Worker model in Early Childhood Intervention in Australia.

Noah's Ark has been actively involved in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) since the initial trial phase and last financial year supported over 3,900 children (birth to 14 years) and their families. Operating across Victoria, the ACT and in parts of NSW, Noah's Ark is a registered NDIS provider delivering a range of programs, including Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS), Pre-School Field Officer (PSFO), the Strengthening Parent Support Program (SPSP), and Communities for Children. The organisation is engaged in research focused on early childhood intervention and inclusion and employs over 350 staff.

The purpose of Noah's Ark is to build better futures for children with disabilities and additional needs. Our vision is that every child develops meaningful relationships, and participates and learns, with the encouragement and understanding of their families, carers, educators, and communities.

Noah's Ark's involvement with Communities for Children (C4C) is in Bendigo, Victoria. C4C Bendigo is a partnership of local services who work together to support children and their families. Baptcare, Bendigo & District Aboriginal Co-operative, Noah's Ark and Shine Bright are Community Partners who are funded by the Facilitating Partner Anglicare Victoria to undertake C4C Bendigo projects. Our primary C4C project is the Voice of the Family (VoF) Project, the key mechanism through which C4C Bendigo listens to and includes family voice. In direct response to listening to family voice in Lived Experience consultations, Noah's Ark currently provides key worker support in supported playgroups as limited access to therapists was identified as a priority need by local families.

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Executive Summary

- We endorse the new vision – All children and young people are supported by strong families who have the skills and confidence to nurture them.
- We support the two main outcomes – Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children and children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.
- Our primary focus is early intervention, and intensive family supports for children with disability or developmental delay. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has had the unintended consequence of siloing supports for children and their families on the scheme. Thriving Kids is being established to reconnect supports for children with developmental delay or mild disability back into their local communities. Therefore, it is vital that the new DSS approach is developed in concert with Thriving Kids.
- The role of the auspice organisation in local areas to pull together projects and agencies, coordinate, and run steering committees is a valuable function and requires adequate funding.
- We agree with the four priorities listed as being the right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families.
- Children with disabilities or developmental delays are at greater risk of maltreatment, so early intervention and prevention support align well with the needs of many families we serve.
- Partnerships between providers for project work and service provision can be very effective in supporting the connection and coordination of services and local networks such as C4C have been very effective. The individualised funding of the NDIS has made it hard for providers of disability services to participate in such networks as it is unfunded and the majority of best practice not-for-profit providers are now operating at a loss due to the funding freeze of the past seven years (National Disability Services, 2025).
- We are very interested in the relational contracting approach. Services delivered for families should be relational and this would be supported by a cascading relational approach.
- It is important to find a balance between the ability to co-design services to suit the needs of local areas with the ability to scale up ideas that have achieved desirable outcomes. Sharing experiences of success can support innovation in other areas and avoid duplication of effort.

Introduction

Noah's Ark welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Social Services'(DSS) consultation on a new approach to programs for families and children. We appreciate that DSS are wanting to provide a better, more coordinated response to ensure every child and family has access to the tools they need to lead healthier, happier lives.

Investing in best-practice supports during the early years of childhood development is not only the right thing to do – it is also a sound investment for Australia. Early intervention is both easier and more effective, with every dollar spent in early childhood yielding long-term savings through improved developmental outcomes, reduced educational costs, and decreased reliance on the service system overall (Heckman & Masterov, 2007; Shonkoff & Fisher, 2013).

Noah's Ark, as an organization with a primary focus on children with a disability or developmental delay, are wanting to draw attention to the need for this new approach to be developed with full consideration of the concurrent design of Thriving Kids. The Parliamentary Inquiry into Thriving Kids is exploring how best to connect early intervention and prevention supports in local communities, to amend the unintended siloing effect created through the implementation of the NDIA.

Contents

This submission will cover:

1. Voice of the Family (VoF) Project

The Voice of the Family (VoF) Project is the key mechanism through which C4C Bendigo listens to and includes family voice. C4C Bendigo have partnered with Noah's Ark Bendigo to undertake this work. One of the key priorities in the C4C Bendigo 2022-2026 Community Strategic Plan driving this project is for families to have agency. This project aims to:

- Centre family voice in the decision making, design and evaluation of services, and include children's voice in strategic decision making and service planning.
- See parents and carers as experts on their children and having the knowledge, skills, confidence, and resources to meet their family's needs.
- Recognise and value the experience of families, and to influence the early years sector to better respond to the aspirations and needs of families.
- Focus on inclusive practice.

Current activities of VoF project include:

- Piloting innovative structures and processes for family participation in decision making, design and evaluation in C4C governance and projects
- Researching and documenting best practice regarding family participation in decision making, design and evaluation, and

- Building sector capacity through sharing lessons learned, insights and resources with the early years sector.

Being responsive to community is integral in the role, which enables us to offer and seek out a variety of project focus areas. This has included working with Karen and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families at supported playgroups, creating a written and visual guide for non-Aboriginal people to working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and children through yarn sessions and meeting with mob, and attending regular cultural training sessions.

Resources created include

- Connecting with Culture on Dja Dja Wurrung Toolkit
- Connecting with Culture on Dja Dja Wurrung video
- Voice of the Family report
- Authentic Engagement and Co-Design with Families

2. What do children and families need?

The primary needs of children are to be in safe, secure, and nurturing child-caregiver relationships (Moore, 2024). Children's basic needs for health, nutrition and sleep need to be met, and they need positive learning experiences, at home and in the community, playing and learning with their peers (Moore, 2024).

To meet the core needs of children, parents and caregivers also need to have their basic needs met (Moore, 2024). The overarching needs of parents and caregivers are also relational. They need to feel connected and supported by others in their families and communities, and to have access to support services that are relationally delivered, trusted, and family-centred (Moore, 2024).

It is within the context of nurturing and responsive relationships with their caregivers that children develop their social, emotional and self-regulatory capacities (Moore, 2024). In addition, children need support to develop health and sleep routines; and to be protected from toxic stress (Moore, 2024). Children and their parents also have shared needs for safe and secure housing, sufficient income to prevent the toxic stress of poverty, access to healthy food, safe neighbourhoods, family-friendly work conditions, and the time and space to bond with each other and connect with their communities (Moore, 2024).

Families are the main facilitators of child development, wellbeing and participation and their capacity to provide care can be challenged. When a child is very ill, requires extended hospitalisation or home care or other intensive treatments, family resources can be severely challenged. Some parents find that having a child with a disability challenges their confidence in parenting their child. Stress can arise from the uncertainty of the child's condition. Receiving a diagnosis of disability is not always straight forward. The term developmental delay is used to describe the uncertainty about a child's condition. It can be evident that a child is not developing well without it being clear why. Many families are hopeful that issues will resolve themselves and, in some instances, this does occur.

As children with a disability or developmental delay require more intensive support from their families to flourish, the support of families of children with a disability or developmental delay is even more imperative (Innocenti et al., 2013). However, having a child with a disability or developmental delay can place additional stress upon families (Buckner & Yeandle, 2017; Guralnick, 2005). Families of children with a disability also have an increased likelihood of experiencing a range of other contextual risk factors (Daniels et al., 2008; Leonard et al., 2005), and children with a disability or developmental delay have been found less likely than other children to receive the warm and responsive parenting they need (Eshbaugh et al., 2011).

The potential stressors arising from having a child with a disability or developmental delay can begin very early, and include a need for information and advice, decision-making regarding services, a need for additional resources, and the efforts of needing to advocate to access those resources (Guralnick, 2005). Parents of children with a disability are more likely to experience parenting stress arising from disrupted sleep (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2013; Jacquier & Newman, 2017) and behaviours of concern (Baker et al., 2003; Keller & Sterling Honig, 2004). The emotional impact of coming to terms with a diagnosis can be varied, impactful and long lasting (Beeber et al., 2017; Bourke-Taylor et al., 2010; Bourke-Taylor et al., 2012; Feniger-Schaal & Oppenheim, 2013; Totsika et al., 2011). Social stigma and isolation can be experienced by parents of children with developmental disability, impacting their physical and mental health (Song et al., 2018). Associations have been found between disability related parenting stress and accelerated shortening of telomeres (Epel et al., 2004) and an increased likelihood of premature parental death (Fairthorne et al., 2014).

Contextual factors can exacerbate these disability-specific risks. Children born into the bottom 10% of socio-economic disadvantage have five times the risk of a mild to moderate intellectual disability than the children in the top ten percent of socio-economic advantage (Leonard et al., 2005). Children with a disability are twice as likely to experience family and domestic violence (Octoman et al., 2022). Mothers with a pre-existing psychiatric diagnosis have an increased likelihood of having a child with cognitive difficulties (Collins et al., 2017) and are twice as likely to have a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (Daniels et al., 2008). Diabetes triples the risk of having a child with ASD while there is a four-fold risk from maternal epilepsy (Fairthorne et al., 2014). This convergence of risk factors means that the families of children with a disability or developmental delay are more likely to be contending with a range of challenges in addition to their child's developmental concerns.

Considering this array of potential stressors parents may be contending with and the negative impact of parental stress on attachment security (Booth et al., 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising that children with a disability or developmental delay are significantly less likely to develop a secure parent-child attachment relationship (Alexander et al., 2023). The quality of parent-child attachment is significantly associated with a wide range of developmental outcomes including but not limited to behaviour (Fearon & Belsky, 2011), communication (Belsky & Fearon, 2002), learning (Geddes, 2018), mental health (Rapoza et al., 2016; Sroufe, 2005), physical health (Puig et al., 2013; Rapoza et al., 2016), social skills (Groh et al., 2014) and socio-emotional regulation (Pallini et al., 2018). Attachment quality forms largely over the first year of life and tends to remain steady, barring major life events (McConnell & Moss, 2011).

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) professionals are well positioned to support the development of secure parent-child relationships when families are able to access ECI early (Alexander et al., 2019).

In this context of disruption and uncertainty, it is important families are supported to seek assistance for their young child. Highly impersonal or bureaucratic gateways to services are neither helpful nor encouraging. Early intervention for young children is based on the principles of early childhood development. Humans learn more rapidly in the early years than at any other stage in life (Moore et al., 2017). During this time, the basic architecture for future development is established. If a child is not developing well, the sooner the situation can be addressed then the greater benefit for future development. The economic imperative for early intervention is based on the importance of intervening early (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). The costs of intervening later are greater, because early developmental opportunities have been lost, poor adaptations have occurred, and it requires greater intervention to bring about change.

Overarchingly, children and families need for there to be a unified policy foundation across health, education, family and social services to ensure that all services in the early years (birth to nine years) are speaking the same language.

3. What is the current situation?

We currently have an ‘early years system’ that operates as a series of siloed services rather than a designed, cohesive system (Moore, 2024). There is a high level of variability across State and Territory jurisdictions and within jurisdictions. Consequently, it can be challenging for any family with a new child to know where to go to connect with other families, information, or general child and family support services. This complexity is exacerbated for families of children experiencing socio-economic challenges and/or developmental risks, concerns, delays or disabilities.

There are many mainstream parenting services available in the community that are beneficial to many families. These include playgroups, maternal & child health care, early childhood education and care, parenting groups, and parenting centres. The shortcoming of these supports can be that they were not designed for children with disability or developmental delay and therefore not underpinned by ECI best practice principles. Children with disabilities were predominantly either within institutions or segregated services for the first ninety years of the twentieth century. This was the period in which community-based children services were developed. These services were not designed with children with developmental delays and disabilities in mind. Additionally, these mainstream services are often limited, fragmented, and inequitably accessible and do not have sufficient funding, expertise, or resources to inclusively provide all families with the level of support they need when they need it. Families experiencing complexity often report frustration at the multiple professionals they currently engage with to access supports for their family.

Many parents and carers access information through online sources, such as AI, Google and social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. Social media can be an unreliable source. Parents and carers will often utilise social media platforms to seek recommendations for supports and services from other parents and carers, which is not always evidence-based or objective.

Children and families are not doing well under the present system. The latest data from the Australian Early Development Census (Australian Government, 2025) shows a significant increase in the percentage of children (n=288,483) who are deemed developmentally vulnerable across all five measured domains. Only 52.9% of children overall, and only 33.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children, were found to be developmentally 'on track'. Geographic location also has an effect with only 43.1% of children in rural and remote areas on track. Furthermore, the impact of socio-economic status has significantly widened, with the developmental gap widening, since the census began in 2009.

On a positive note, the Australian Federal Government, has recently released a draft Early Years Strategy articulating a vision for all Australian children to thrive and reach their potential supported by strong and connected families and communities (Australian Government, 2024). This vision supports children with a disability to achieve their rights under the Convention of the Rights of the Child and to be provided with the care and support they need to develop, participate and live a full and decent life (UNICEF, 2014). A vision such as this for all children can support the framing of a design for both Thriving Kids and the new approach of the Department of Social Services to programs for children and families.

4. Considerations regarding Thriving Kids

Both general and targeted foundational supports offered under Thriving Kids should be a part of an early year's landscape which is designed to support all children and families to thrive. While there has always been scope for improvement, the early years sector was much better connected in many areas prior to the roll-out of the NDIS. Early Years professionals tended to have a good understanding of the importance of a connected system, both at an individual child and family level – where everyone involved in the child's life is collaborating and communicating, working alongside the family on shared goals and understandings; but also, at an organisational and sector-wide level.

For example, under the Victorian state-based system of ECI, these connections were deliberately strengthened by the State Government through Early Years networks. Consequently, there was a basic understanding of what each of the services were designed to achieve and connections between personnel. The Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services for children with developmental delays and disabilities were part of these networks and services were allocated time to connect with each other. The development of the Early Years Framework, and in Victoria the Early Years Learning and Development Framework, provided common principles and language. While Early Years networks such as C4C continue to exist, ECI and disability service providers are less likely to be engaged since the roll out of the NDIS, due to the system constraints that have limited opportunities for networking and the introduction of a competitive market. To rebuild the advantage of a more integrated approach that can benefit children and families, the following needs to be considered:

- **Funding model –** which supports collaborative relationships between services and provides the capacity to connect to the local early childhood policy context and its funded services. There are some successful models of the role of connectors. These are charged with the task of connecting families and services in a local area. Communities That Care® may serve as an example for this - https://www.communitiesthatcare.org.au/publications-and-research
- **Inclusion and cohesion - keeping** C4C initiatives to be accessible and inclusive of all.
- **Best Practice Framework -** the recently released Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Best Practice Framework - https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/national-best-practice-framework-for-early-childhood-intervention?language=en – is highly relevant to the new approach of the DSS. The key principles of these new guidelines are:
    - Rights based
    - Relationship based
    - Strengths based
    - Ecologically based
    - Child centred
    - Family centred
    - Cultural safety
    - Diversity affirming
    - Participation
    - Everyday settings
    - Teamwork
    - Community focused
    - Outcome focused
    - Evidence informed
- **National Blueprint - t**he draft Australian National Early Years Strategy (2024-2034) articulates a vision of all Australian children thriving and reaching their full potential through the nurturing of their empowered and connected families, who in turn are being supported by strong communities (Australian Government, 2024). An evidence-informed blueprint for all children would ensure a focus on prevention and the earliest possible intervention with a best practice approach supported by a new funding model and regulations, and a viable workforce plan. It is vital that supports integrate all contexts of a child's life, including family, community, and learning environments.

5. Summary

Overall, we have two key points we would like to contribute to this consultation. First, understanding that DSS has a focus on all children and families, we believe it is important this reform is undertaken in full knowledge of, and in concert with, the Thriving Kids reform to ensure that cohesive support is available for all children and families to thrive. Second, the role of connector organisations in coordinating and administering projects, gathering and sharing outcomes, is important and needs to be funded. If we could add a third point it would be a hope that C4C retain the flexibility for both locally co-designed projects and the opportunity for outcome data to be shared and opportunities enabled for successes to be scaled up.

6. Recommendations

Noah's Ark recommends the following to be considered in their new approach to programs for children and families:

- Unifying policy across education, disability and social services
- The new National Best Practice Framework for Early Intervention (Moore T., 2025)
- Desired outcomes are clear and measured and successes shared
- Initiatives are accessible and inclusive – families with children with a disability or developmental delay also need support at times with family violence, mental health etc
- The role of connecting services; assessing and sharing outcomes; and coordinating; and administering projects; is important and needs to be funded appropriately.

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