



# Community Child Care Association Submission to the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005

## **Disability Standards for Education Review Team Disability Strategy Taskforce**

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As a member-based organisation, Community Child Care Association (CCC) supports more than 600 not-for-profit, community-based education and care (E&C) services as the peak body in Victoria for community based child care services. CCC also leads the collaborative consortium that, together with KU Children's Services and Yooralla, forms the Victorian Inclusion Agency – a government funded program working with services to build their capacity and capability to provide inclusive practices, and address barriers to inclusion experienced by children with additional needs (Australian Government, Inclusion Support Program). The Victorian Inclusion Agency (VIA) and Inclusion Professionals (IP's) play a vital role in assisting children's services, including long day care services (LDC), family day care (FDC), and outside school hours care (OSHC) providers to ensure that they are able to support inclusion of children with disabilities.

Our focus here will be on the experience of our members in regards to the access and participation of children with disabilities, and how they interact with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and the Disability Standards in Education (the Standards).

## **Barriers to access**

### **Issue: Lack of provider and educator knowledge of responsibilities**

All children in Australia have the right to an inclusive education (Cologon, 2013), that allows them to learn and thrive in a supportive environment. The government legislation Disability Standards for Education 2005 makes clear the rights of all students with disability, and the obligations of education providers to accept applications for admission of children with disability without discrimination. In the ECEC sector, many educators and services show remarkable willingness and enthusiasm to provide not just high quality education for children with disabilities, but ensuring they provide a caring, compassionate, and nurturing environment in which they can learn. When inclusion is done well, its benefits are several fold – educators and their services benefit, the child



and their families feel welcomed and accepted, and other children in the learning environment can benefit too. To ensure that inclusion is universal within the ECEC sector, more awareness raising of the Disability Discrimination Act and the inclusion standards is needed.

Particularly for OSHC but in other E&C services too, the lack of planning time or paid professional development and training opportunities focused on disability means that educators can feel overwhelmed, or feel trepidation when tasked with making positive steps for participation for children with disability. Creating more accountability for the E&C providers when it comes to supporting their workforce around inclusion and participation, not just placing the onus on the educators themselves, would provide essential support for the workforce. Increasing educator capability and capacity would address some of the barriers to access for children with disability, and would further support educators in creating a positive attitude and outlook towards the inclusion of children with disability.

### Solution:

CCC believes that this could be achieved by:

- Including all E&C service types (not just kindergarten) in the Disability Discrimination Act
- Including the required standards into the existing National Quality Standards (NQS) for children's education and care
- Initiating an awareness raising campaign of these roles and responsibilities for the education and care sector
- Including workforce development strategies about these responsibilities and how to meet them in the National Workforce Strategy, such as
  - Ensuring educators across all service types have adequate planning and paid professional development time to plan for and include children with disabilities
  - Incorporating supporting children with disability learning and care at the training stage as a core aspect of the Cert III, Diploma and degree qualifications
  - Regular accessible professional development opportunities on supporting children with disabilities in the variety of service types.



## Case study

### Alpha early learning centre, Melbourne

The family of a four year old child with diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder approached the Director of the Alpha Early Learning Centre in Melbourne when they were looking to access LDC and kindergarten for their child. They were very worried that revealing the diagnosis would mean they would be denied access to the service, and they cried with relief when they were assured that the service was prepared, and more than happy, to work with the family to provide access to the child. The family and the Director sat down together with read through the child's medical reports and relevant documentation, so they were aware of the full scope of the child's needs. The family were able to observe the child in the education environment, and they liked the layout and the programs being run at the service. The parents of the child wanted him to be accepted, supported, and included in an educational program, and for him to be educated and nurtured alongside other children of his own age. They felt the environment was one their child could thrive in.

The educators were fully supportive, and worked together to do their best to assist in

the child's development. Additional staff were employed to support the room during group and meal times, so that the kindergarten teacher could focus on program delivery. The service had a designated IP support worker and they went through the relevant process for approval of the overall environment to ensure it met the child's needs. Additional staff were also on hand to support the child's inclusion on excursions and outings with the other children.

Over the past two years, in the pre kinder and kinder room, the child has made remarkable progress and has been meeting relevant developmental milestones. The educators at the service were emotionally invested in the child's care, and feel very proud to have seen the progress he has made. The child now participates fully in group activities, is able to have meals with the other children, and is expected to transition to a mainstream school next year. By creating a holistic approach to care, incorporating the service's community, the child and his family, and the educators, the child was able to access and fully participate in early childhood education, just as his family had hoped.



## Issue: Complexity of current supports available

Here in Victoria there are a lot of free programs that support education and care services to include children with disabilities, this is part of the challenge for services. At present inclusion support provided across the sector is complex and provided by both state and federal governments.

For state funded services, such as 3 and 4 year old Kindergarten programs, the Victorian Government provides:

- Preschool Field Officer Program that supports the access and participation of children with additional needs into kindergarten programs by providing advice and support to services
- Kindergarten Inclusion Support Program that provides funding support to plan and implement a program, including employment of an additional educator, that is responsive to the individual abilities, interests and needs of children with a disability, developmental delay or complex medical needs
- School Readiness Funding provides extra funding support to help children to get the most out of their early learning. This program focuses service's spending on communication (language development), wellbeing (social and emotional) and access and inclusion. Thus providing opportunities to further support the inclusion and experiences of children with disabilities
- A number of online training modules to support the inclusion of children with disabilities, including the Early Ables Tool.

For Commonwealth funded programs, such as LDC (that also include funded kinder programs), FDC and OSHC, the Australian Government provides:

- Inclusion Support Program that provides advice and support from Inclusion Professionals (IPs), funding for additional educators to support the inclusion of a child with disabilities, funding for building capacity of educators to include children with additional needs and access to specialist equipment.

Government funded support to E&C providers is essential to build the capacity to cater for the needs of children with disability and all of these programs provide invaluable supports to the sector. However, because they all have different funding guidelines, are run by different agencies, have different planning, application and reporting requirements it makes for a very complex system for service providers and leaders to navigate.



Leaders and educators are often, unsurprisingly, confused about the different programs, their parameters and service eligibility. For example, why can't state funded kindergartens access the specialist equipment library? Or why can't FDC access the support of Preschool Field Officers?

LDC services with kindergarten programs can have up to 4 different professionals coming to their service to provide advice (sometimes conflicting) about how to best support the inclusion of children with disabilities and this does not include the Authorised Officers doing monitoring and compliance checks or carrying out rating and assessment activities or early intervention professionals working with a child. This can undermine teacher and educator confidence in the correct inclusion strategies and approaches to enact.

If services want to access support, most of these various programs require a different plan and or application or paper work to be completed and this is on top of their Quality Improvement Plan. This all adds to the administrative burden of services and more confusion.

As previously stated these government funded support to ECEC providers are essential to build the capacity to cater for the needs of children however, over time there have been diminishing resources available in each program to meet the needs of the sector. For example, the Victorian Inclusion Agency currently supports one full time staff member to work with approximately sixty services. This ratio of services to inclusion professional has grown as the sector has grown and resources have not matched the growth in the sector.

Providing simpler and streamlined opportunities for services to be able to access the support and funding streams available would increase educator confidence, allowing them to be able to ensure participation for children with disabilities. Streamlining the application processes so that it is easily accessible to services would also increase participation.

### Solution:

CCC believes that this could be achieved by State and federal funding bodies having integrated support mechanisms across the sector, including:

- Single inclusion program that supports both state and federal funded services
- Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) used as the planning tool to support all additional funding accessed by services to support children with disabilities
- Single provider for all inclusion support across Victoria, that could provide slightly differentiated support to different service types and would provide more of a single point of consistent support for services



- Integrated planning and responses to inclusion of children with disabilities assessed through the rating and assessment for the NQS.

### Issue: Cost to families

The global Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the importance of early childhood and care services in Australia like never before, as families and government relied on the sector to enable parents to continue working. The economic benefits of workforce participation, and the lifelong benefits of early childhood education are well known, but the cost of accessing E&C services may be prohibitive for families whose household income has been impacted by the pandemic. For families with a child with a disability, accessing E&C for their child may come with additional costs that place an unnecessary financial burden on the families. Parents may need to pay for extra appointments, copies of medical documents or reports, or they may be asked to provide equipment or other resources themselves if the service does not have access to these. For families whose financial situation was unstable prior to the pandemic, the cost of utilising E&C services going forward may be difficult. Ensuring that these families have access to subsidised care for their children will have significant impact on access for children with disabilities.

Financial support through programs listed above do not always cover all the additional costs incurred by services of including a child with a disability. Many, many service providers are willing and happy to bear these costs as they understand the value to all stakeholders of inclusion of children with disabilities. However some service providers, particularly those in low socio-economic areas, may not be able to set their fees, for all families, at a level that allows them to absorb the additional costs of strategies such as employing an additional educator. Therefore limiting access of families with a child with a disability.

There are opportunities for E&C providers to work more closely with the National Disability Insurance Planners, to ensure that families have the financial support they need to continue to access E&C services. For children with a diagnosed disability, this may provide additional support for families.

### Solution:

CCC believes that this could be achieved by:

- NDIA planners working with families are encouraged to explore any additional costs of children accessing and attending education and care settings, so these costs are included in their child's plans



- Inclusion support funding offered to education and care cover the full costs of strategies such as employing an additional educator.

## Barriers to participation:

### Issue: Further clarity required around 'reasonable adjustments'

Services have some understanding of what 'reasonable adjustments' entail, but further clarity is needed for both families and services, so that there is a shared understanding of what could be considered fair-minded modifications to environments and programs.

Services that have reflected on their practice and planned well to include all children are more prepared for inclusive practice and to make reasonable adjustments for individuals. Having inclusion at the forefront of their service's philosophy also means that barriers to participation are more readily addressed and strategies developed throughout their programme to include all children.

Large providers of E&C services have centralised supports and infrastructure that may include a designated inclusion team are often better able to assist with individual service's inclusion planning and also often have a good knowledge of what supports are available for services. Many services do not know the breadth of supports available to them, or how to access them.

Outside School Hours Care services can have particular challenges for accommodating participation. Often they do not have their own unique care spaces, and are confined to shared spaces like a school library or general purpose room. These may not have the particular adjustments needed to ensure all children can participate in their programs. OSHC services can find the process to apply and receive inclusion funding difficult and time consuming, but they rely heavily on this funding to be able to support children with disabilities. A barrier to access and participation is the cost for families, but also the cost to services. OSHC services have known families to have been turned away from school holiday programs due to the cost of providing care to a child with disabilities. The high staff turnover, lack of funding, low levels of educator confidence and skills can also be barriers to participation for children with disabilities. The low awareness of OSHC as an educational space in the wider community also means that OSHC are not as noticed as LDC or kindergarten services and discrimination within this sector is not as widely known.

## Solution:

CCC believes that this could be achieved by:

- Providing a clear, concise definition of ‘reasonable adjustments’ within the National Quality Standards that would provide a shared understanding for the E&C sector, and for families of children with disability
- Previous recommendations apply regarding what resources are available and can reasonably be expected to be provided, to ensure access and participation for children with disability.

## Issue: E&C environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disability

Aboriginal children aged 0–14 years are more than twice as likely as non-Indigenous children to have a disability (Di Giacomo et al, 2017). The cost of education and care services can be another barrier to accessing education services for many families, but perhaps even more so for children with disability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. Parents of children with a disability from an Indigenous Australian background are more likely to experience poor health themselves than members of the general population, and with this can come socio-economic impacts that could make accessing outside of home or family care too difficult from a financial perspective (Di Giacomo et al, 2017).

For these families barriers in addition to the cost can be the lengthy enrolment process, not feeling comfortable with the philosophy of a service, possible language barriers, and seeing no representation of their culture or lacking a feeling of ‘cultural safety’. Some services are not seen as ‘safe spaces’ within some Aboriginal communities, and if the families feel they are not welcome they will avoid seeking access for their children, regardless perhaps of the child’s abilities. Trusting a service to provide good care for their child with a disability on top of these existing and equally important barriers, could be an even further deterrent for some families.

There is an increased opportunity for E&C to work more closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with a disability. Although access and participation for children with a disability has improved over recent years, parents may find it challenging to advocate for their child’s rights to access and participation if they are not always aware of what this looks like, or where to go when their needs are not met. This is especially the case for children with disability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, or for children from vulnerable families. For these children, services not having a Reconciliation Action Plan is a barrier to participation, regardless of whether





the child has additional needs. Creating an integrated, streamlined approach to implementing the Disability Standards, in a similar way to the other system requirements must be met by services already may be most effective in supporting inclusion for Indigenous Australian children with disability.

### Solution:

CCC believes that this could be achieved by:

- Ensuring the QIP is a strategic document and that inclusion planning such as Reconciliation Action Plans and Strategic Inclusion Plans are embedded or clearly connected to their QIP, would assist services to see meeting each child's needs, including a child from an Indigenous Australian background that has a disability, is part of their quality service delivery
- Further support and encouragement for services to systematically reflect on and plan for their inclusive practice – such as specific strategies in the Education and Care National Workforce Strategy and the Early Childhood Education, Closing the Gap Report.

For further comment:

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