

Thriving Kids

Ideas to inform a genuine co-design process



In August 2025, Minister for Disability and the NDIS Mark Butler announced \$2 billion in federal funding for a new Thriving Kids initiative. The purpose of Thriving Kids is to provide a national program of supports for children aged eight and under with developmental delay and/or autism with low to moderate support needs and their families.

This initiative will have the greatest chance of achieving positive results if it is genuinely co-designed in partnership with people with lived experience, the disability community, and other stakeholders. To help inform a co-design process, JFA Purple Orange presents a few of our ideas about how Thriving Kids could work.

Key principles

Thriving Kids should:

- ✓ Ensure inclusion, belonging, and dignity for all children, parents, and families
- ✓ Be easy to access and freely available to all those who are likely to benefit
- ✓ Be embedded in everyday settings within local communities, including in rural and remote locations
- ✓ Reflect the Social Model of Disability
- ✓ Align with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention
- ✓ Have robust referral pathways and accessible supporting information
- ✓ Be readily available to ensure timely support because delays can have a profound impact during childhood
- ✓ Be responsive to place-based, cohort-specific, and intersectional needs while ensuring quality, safety, and universal access to core programs
- ✓ Involve programs and program elements that are evidence-based and implemented through genuine co-design
- ✓ Upskill the existing workforce in everyday settings to take the primary role in program delivery overseen by subject matter experts
- ✓ Be designed to work well in all settings, including public, private, and independent early childhood and school settings
- ✓ Complement and, if appropriate, be integrated with existing successful programs
- ✓ Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all programs and program elements
- ✓ Once established provide long-term funding consistency and certainty within a holistic, integrated system of supports

- ✓ Include disability-led, independent oversight and evaluation
- ✓ Use accurate and respectful language

Thriving Kids should not:

- ✗ Perpetuate discrimination, exclusion, othering, or segregation of children
- ✗ Require a diagnosis, assessment, or other onerous criteria for access
- ✗ Require families to make a co-payment or other financial contribution
- ✗ Exclude children with individual NDIS plans
- ✗ Be medicalised, clinical in nature, or perpetuate service and support silos
- ✗ Remove children from classes, activities, or other learning opportunities alongside their peers
- ✗ Be delivered as an online-only option, including in rural and remote locations
- ✗ Place onerous or duplicated reporting requirements on organisations
- ✗ Remove children from the NDIS before Thriving Kids is available in their local community

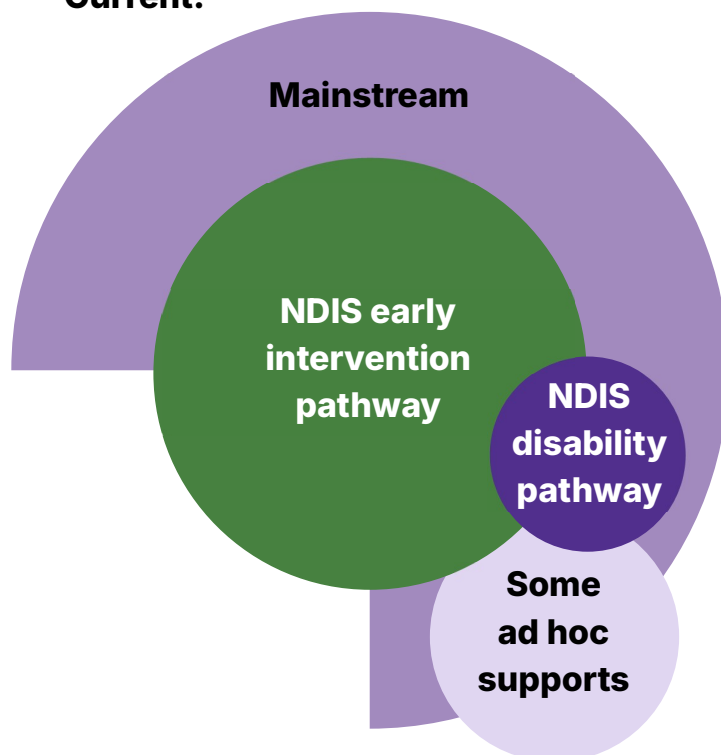
Design approach

The diagrams below show a visual representation of the current system and how the proposed Thriving Kids initiative can be integrated within a holistic design approach for supports that enable all children, parents, and families to thrive.

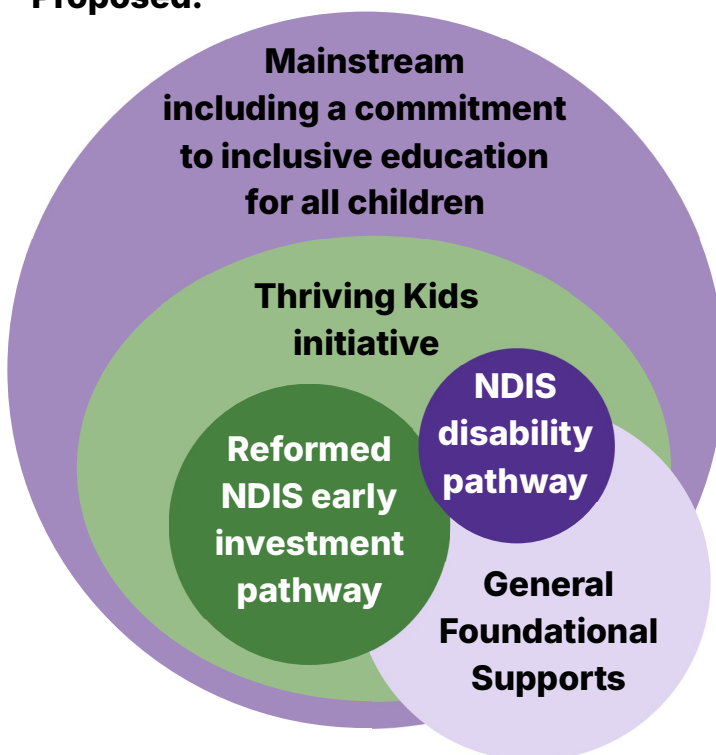
Currently, there are significant gaps in mainstream systems including a range of barriers to access. This is depicted by the cut-out corner of the diagram on the left. Fixing this will enable a full wraparound of mainstream services that provide a stronger foundation, per the diagram on the right.

The addition of an effective Thriving Kids initiative that reduces pressure on the NDIS early intervention pathway (left) will ensure that component shrinks over time into a smaller reformed NDIS early investment pathway (right). If Thriving Kids succeeds in better supporting children with low to moderate support needs to thrive, this model will be cost-effective and sustainable.

Current:



Proposed:



Below, we explain each element of our proposal in more detail, although we again emphasise the importance of genuinely co-designing the initiative.

Mainstream:

Most mainstream systems, services, and supports are not yet fully accessible or inclusive for Australian children with disability and/or developmental delay.

Many early childhood education and care centres, schools, and other settings for children continue to have exclusionary practices that fail to appropriately support the needs of all children. As a result, there is a significant gap that leaves many families with very limited options to seek support.

Governments need to address this gap through building access and inclusion into all mainstream systems, including with a national commitment to inclusive education at all levels. Research demonstrates that all children, including those without disability, receive a higher quality education in inclusive settings than they do when practices of discrimination, exclusion, and segregation are allowed to occur.

A national commitment to inclusive education at all levels will help close the current gaps in mainstream systems for children and provide the strongest possible foundation to establish a successful Thriving Kids initiative.

Thriving Kids initiative:

The Thriving Kids initiative should be embedded within accessible and inclusive mainstream services and offer all children who would benefit access to programs and supports. It should be established to reduce pressure on the NDIS through providing a genuine alternative option to individual NDIS plans when appropriate – not by replacing any existing elements of the Scheme.



The Thriving Kids initiative should comprise a range of small group programs and supports within the everyday community settings where children already are. They should not involve removing children from other activities and learning opportunities alongside their peers.

Subject matter experts, such as allied health professionals and developmental educators, should lead the program development, coordination, and oversight. Educators and other staff who are already familiar to children should take the primary role in program delivery. An investment in additional staff and workforce upskilling will be essential for success.

NDIS early investment pathway:

Children who will benefit from one-to-one supports should access these through a reformed NDIS early investment pathway (currently known as early intervention). We note some have expressed concerns about creating 'dual pathways' for children, however abolishing this pathway or requiring children to complete Thriving Kids program elements prior to accessing one-

to-one supports will result in access delays and exclusions – something that contradicts the stated desire that the Thriving Kids initiative will enable earlier identification of needs and engagement with supports.

Nevertheless, this pathway should be reformed to provide a more straight-forward access process and to ensure greater flexibility, including allowing families to 'dip in and out' as needed while maintaining eligibility rather than be pressured to use a set amount of yearly funding or lose it. This will ensure any 'overservicing' is eliminated.

NDIS disability pathway:

Individual NDIS plans should continue to be available for children requiring supports for significant and permanent disability.

Children eligible for the disability pathway should also be able to access and benefit from the Thriving Kids initiative. For example, a child with physical disability who is eligible for the disability pathway should be enabled to access Thriving Kids if they would benefit regarding developmental delay. Not only will this approach be more likely to achieve positive outcomes for children, but it will also be more practical within the settings where Thriving Kids is delivered.

General Foundational Supports:

Support for families to access information and navigate the supports available across this holistic approach will be essential.

For further information, please contact Selena on 08 8373 8394 or selenam@purpleorange.org.au

We often hear that families struggle to find out what is available and that some existing programs are not utilised because the intended beneficiaries are unaware they exist. Therefore, easy access to accessible information and navigation supports will boost the cost effectiveness of Thriving Kids. The design of information and navigation supports should consider the broader need to reform NDIS navigation, as recommended by the NDIS Review.

Next steps

1. Co-design the Thriving Kids initiative in partnership with people with lived experience, the disability community, and other stakeholders
2. Support the co-design process with a comprehensive audit of existing programs, their supporting evidence, and their consistency with key principles
3. Recalibrate the stated timeline to ensure a high quality and safe program is delivered
4. Trial/pilot, evaluate, learn, and adjust program elements and commissioning models before scaling up to full roll out
5. Ensure there is a robust Thriving Kids data plan including improvements to broader data collection where this is relevant to evaluating the initiative



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