



**Submission to the “Foundational Supports” Consultation
November 2024**

Playgroup Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which we play, work and live and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures; and to Elders past, present and emerging.

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Our members:



Introduction

Playgroup Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the General Supports and the Foundational Supports for Children consultation papers. As an organisation dedicated to supporting young children, families and communities through playgroup, we offer unique insights into the role that playgroups can play in building inclusive and accessible community-based supports outside the NDIS.

About Playgroup Australia

Playgroup Australia is the peak body for providers of playgroup services in Australia. Playgroups in Australia are a movement 50+ years strong and operate in every state and territory across our country. Our mission is to advocate for playgroups and support our members to strengthen delivery of quality playgroup services to young children and families.

Our Vision: Every child & family is positively impacted by participation in Playgroup.

Our Mission: Playgroup Australia is the National peak body, championing the important role of the Playgroup Movement in delivering positive social impact by supporting young children, families and communities.

About Playgroups

Playgroups are groups of young children (birth to school-age) and their parents or carers who meet regularly to play and socialise. Playgroups make a significant contribution to family wellbeing and to improving early childhood development outcomes in Australia, providing:

- Play-based learning and opportunities to support development across all domains;
- social support for parents and carers; and
- connections that build communities.

Community playgroups are mostly volunteer-led, which means they strengthen local communities while they support the wellbeing of children, parents and carers. Our members also deliver supported playgroups, which are led by a paid facilitator and build community inclusion and participation for children and families with particular needs. There is a strong and growing evidence-base on the benefits playgroups provide for children in their critical first five years of development. The nation benefits when all children, parents and carers have access to affordable, inclusive local playgroups.

The Role of Playgroups in Foundational Supports

Playgroups have a proven track record of delivering developmental and social benefits to children and families, including those with disabilities or developmental delays. They provide a natural and inclusive setting where early intervention can occur, facilitating positive child and family outcomes. Led by Playgroup Australia, our members deliver programs that exemplify how community-based services can offer inclusive environments, peer support, expert information and access to developmental assessments and interventions. Playgroups represent an ideal opportunity to leverage an existing trusted community-based program to deliver assessment and early intervention to children and families who need it most.

Response to Key Consultation Points

1. Information, Advice, and Referral Services:

Playgroups are a trusted community setting that provide families with access to essential information about early childhood development, disability supports, and referrals to services. For many families, playgroups represent an ideal soft entry point to more targeted supports, offering early identification of developmental concerns and guiding families toward appropriate services. In rural and remote locations, playgroup is often the only program available to children and families in their region.

Playgroup Australia supports the proposal for digital, phone-based, and in-person service delivery, and recommend integrating playgroups into local networks as an in-person source of trusted information and advice.

Playgroup facilitators can play a crucial role in connecting families to broader supports and sharing resources tailored to the needs of children with developmental vulnerabilities. Playgroup development officers support playgroup facilitators with relevant and accurate information that can be either provided directly to the families or relayed through playgroup leaders.

Digital and phone based advice should be targeted broadly. One of the first and biggest challenges people with disability and their families face when it comes to seeking support is knowing where to start. They may not identify initially that they require “generalist”, “developmental” or “disability” supports, just that they need “something”. The naming, navigation and promotion of these supports need to reflect this to ensure access.

2. Capacity Building for Families:

Research shows that interventions which are delivered in natural, non-clinical setting and take a holistic approach to engaging the entire family deliver the best outcomes. It is critical that foundational supports abide by these principles to ensure optimum accessibility and the best outcomes for the people with disability and families that engage with them.

By design, playgroups deliver not only improved child development outcomes but also parental empowerment. The programs we offer within the playgroup setting support parents to build the confidence to advocate for their child's needs, and the skills to implement early intervention strategies within the home. Playgroups foster a family-centred approach that aligns with the proposed General Support's focus on building the capacity of families and carers.

Peer Support and Social Connection: At their core, Playgroups foster peer connections and social inclusion for both children and their families. Our playgroup programs bring families with similar experiences together, reducing isolation and building strong social networks. The peer-to-peer learning that takes place at playgroup sees parents build networks that provide emotional support, practical advice, and shared problem-solving. This informal capacity building strengthens parents' ability to navigate raising a child with developmental concerns or disability, while also reducing feelings of isolation and stress.

Empowering Parents in Early Intervention: Playgroups offer parents a direct and informal way to observe and understand their child's developmental milestones. This understanding is critical for early intervention. Programs like South Australia's *Ready, Steady, Progress* offer developmental screenings and early support sessions in a playgroup setting which is familiar and non-clinical. These early identification activities empower parents to take proactive steps in seeking further assistance, where necessary, without the stress often associated with more formal or clinical interventions.

Practical Parenting Support: Playgroups naturally foster skill-building for parents. They provide them with the tools and confidence to support their child's development. By including facilitated activities, parents can learn about communication techniques, socialisation strategies, and play-based learning that they can easily implement at home. Programs like *Peep Learning Together*, which offers evidence-based adult learning through playgroups, help parents recognise how everyday interactions contribute to a child's cognitive and emotional growth. By learning in a relaxed, peer-supported environment, parents can translate these strategies into daily routines.

3. Capacity Building for Communities

Being able to engage with and access supports within one's own community are crucial determinants of an intervention's positive outcomes. Playgroups are essential in building the capacity of communities to be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of children with disabilities and their families. Playgroup Australia and our members work with community organisations to foster inclusivity, reduce barriers to participation, and create environments where all children, can thrive.

Inclusive Community Programs: Initiatives like *PlayTogether* and *PALS* (Play and Learn Supported) demonstrate how playgroups can build community capacity for inclusion. These programs work directly with local playgroups to develop resources and training for facilitators, ensuring that they can effectively support children with developmental delays or disabilities. By co-designing activities with families and community partners, these programs ensure that playgroups are equipped to address diverse needs, making them welcoming spaces for all families.

Building Long-term Community Engagement: Playgroups help communities develop the skills and attitudes to support children of all abilities. Our *PALS* program fosters broader community participation by embedding inclusivity into community activities including art, sports, and cultural events.

Partnering with Local Services: Playgroups are conduits to other services, offering a soft entry point to early childhood and disability support services. By partnering with health and allied service providers, playgroups can offer access to developmental checks and early intervention in a non-clinical environment. These partnerships can identify children who may need additional support, while ensuring that families receive guidance and referrals in a familiar, trusted setting.

Partnerships in Practice: ACT Playgroups Tumblers Program

The Tumblers Program is a pilot partnership between ACT Playgroups, and Early Childhood School and Allied Health services targeting children and families who are:

- First Nation's
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
- experiencing high physical developmental vulnerability and/or
- experiencing parent mental health challenges.

The program engages a paediatric physiotherapist and two student occupational therapists to provide foundational skills, peer support, informal assessment, referral and information.

Recommendations

1. Invest in Playgroup Programs as Part of the General Supports Framework:

- Playgroups should be recognised as a key vehicle for foundational supports, particularly for offering community based general supports including capacity building, information sharing and peer support, as well as assessment and early intervention. We recommend upscaling investment in inclusive playgroup models, such as *PALS*, which are cost-effective, evidence-based solutions that align with the intentions of foundational supports.

2. Embed Playgroups in Local Referral Networks:

- Playgroups should be formally included as part of the local referral networks. Playgroups can help families access disability supports earlier and more effectively, reducing long-term reliance on intensive services.

3. Expand Developmental Screening through Playgroups:

- Building on Playgroup South Australia's experience with *Ready, Steady, Progress*, we recommend expanding the provision of developmental screenings and early intervention initiatives through playgroups nationally. This will ensure early identification of developmental delays and connect families to appropriate services in a natural, community setting.

Playgroup Australia are supportive of the intention of foundational supports to ensure more Australians with disability can access the information and supports they need without falling through the gaps of an overburdened NDIS and mainstream health care system.

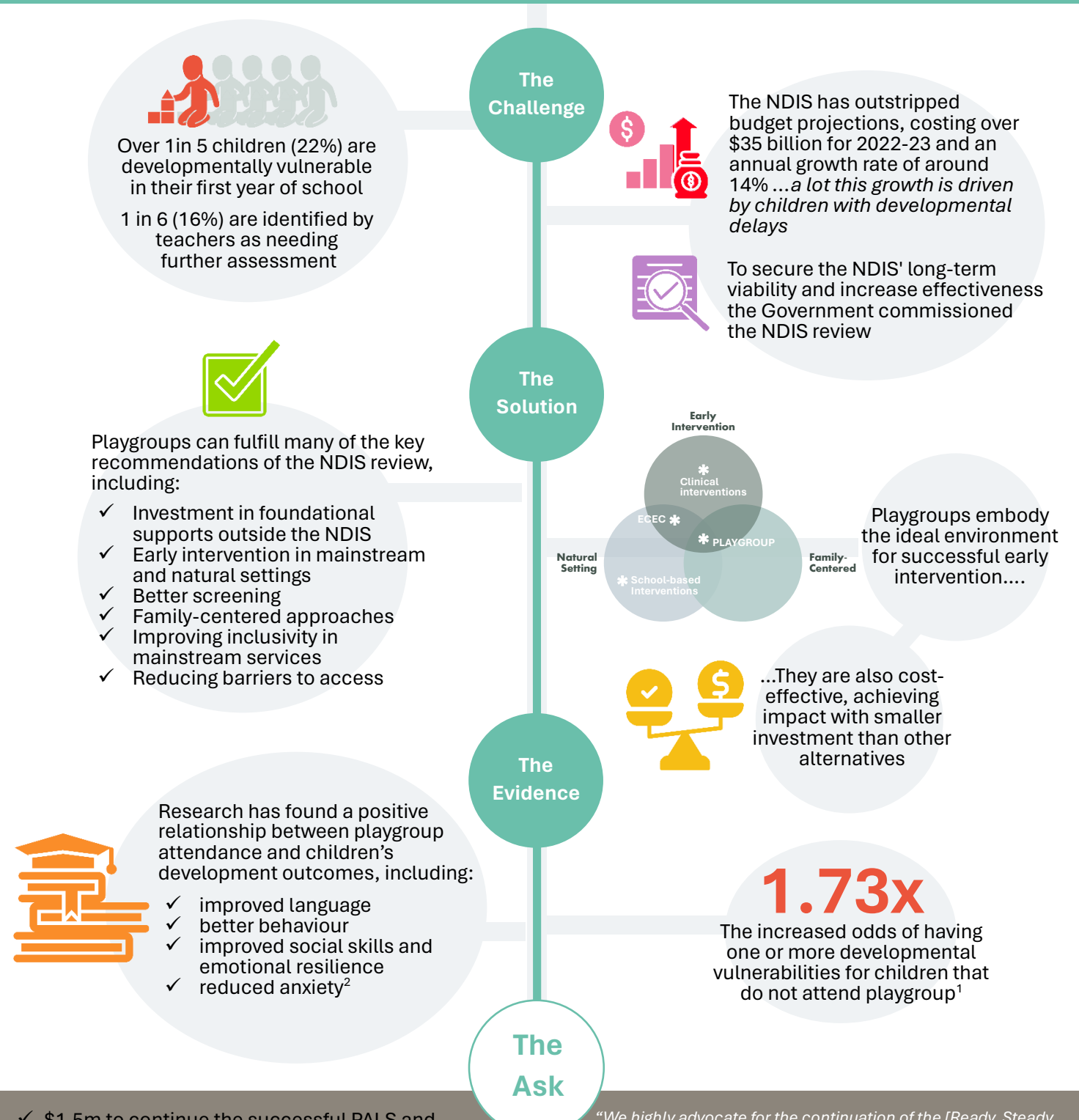
Playgroup Australia, in partnership with Equity Economics, have developed a comprehensive proposal (Appendix A) outlining how playgroup can be leveraged to offer children with a disability and their families the support they need, when and where they need it.

As a cost-effective and proven model supporting more than 35,000 participants every week, playgroups are uniquely positioned to enhance the capacity of families and communities while supporting the developmental needs of children with disabilities and delays. We urge the government to recognise the role of playgroups in this reform and invest in expanding these vital programs to support more families across Australia.

THE POWER OF PLAYGROUPS: Supporting a more effective and sustainable NDIS

The Power of Playgroups: A small investment with BIG impact

Playgroup Australia's programs PALS, PlayTogether, and Ready, Steady, Progress, directly align with your funding priorities. They deliver proven community outcomes, support government objectives, and do so cost-effectively.



- ✓ \$1.5m to continue the successful PALS and PlayTogether programs (\$6.4m over 4 years). *These programs encourage inclusive playgroups and build ongoing community capacity to be inclusive.*
- ✓ \$8.7 million to expand the SA Ready, Steady, Progress program nationally (\$36.6m over 4 years). *This program provides developmental screening, referrals and support in a natural and family-centered environment.*

"We highly advocate for the continuation of the [Ready, Steady, Progress] program until the end of 2024 and beyond."
– Catholic Education South Australia

"Our 5-year-old son has recently received funding through the NDIS early childhood approach... we wish we would have known about developmental screening and that this program had been available to us in our state" – Former playgroup parent to a child on the NDIS

"It's been wonderful ... this is actually an inclusive playgroup. And so, I didn't have to feel like I was being judged or being worried about being judged" – Playgroup parent involved in PALS

1. Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2023)
2. Studies include Hancock et al (2012), Williams et al. (2018), Gregory et al (2017), Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2012), ARTD (2008), Jackson (2006), Johnson, & Sullivan (2004). Sincovich, et al (2020) and others

PLAYGROUPS: STRENGTHENING THE NDIS WITH COST-EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

Too many Australian children are starting school with developmental vulnerabilities. In their first year of school, over 1 in 5 children (22%) are assessed as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains¹ and over 1 in 10 are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains (11%).² 1 in 6 (16.3%) are identified by their teachers as requiring further assessment. While the NDIS is primarily focused on supporting people with disabilities, the NDIS recognises that developmental vulnerabilities can be an early indicator of disability and understands the importance of early intervention for children with developmental delays and disability.

The NDIS has outstripped budget projections, at a cost of over \$35 billion for 2022-23 and an annual growth rate of around 14%. A large portion of this growth is driven by children with developmental delays. As at 31 December 2023, there were 155,677 children younger than 9 accessing the scheme and a further 15,135 accessing early connections (such as assistance from early childhood partners to access information, connect to community and mainstream services, or help apply to the NDIS).³

In a bid to both secure the NDIS' long-term viability and enhance its effectiveness, the government commissioned an independent review '*Working together to deliver the NDIS*' in 2023. The review highlighted the need for substantial improvements in how children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families are supported. It found that approximately 20% of children face learning challenges, developmental delays or concerns, or are diagnosed with disabilities.

Recommendations from the Review include:

- Significant investment by governments in foundational supports outside the NDIS for children with disability and developmental concerns in their early years, particularly in mainstream settings (*and that support should be delivered in natural settings wherever possible — homes, early childhood settings and schools*).
- Better screening (child development checks) to ensure early identification of children with developmental concerns and disability and enable early intervention – implemented by mainstream services working with children.
- Action to ensure mainstream services are inclusive for children with disability and developmental concerns.

Playgroups are a cost-effective solution to key recommendations from the NDIS review

It is clear that part of the NDIS challenge is that mainstream supports are not fully meeting the needs of children and families, higher funding for playgroup services will help fill that gap by providing a continuum of service not only for those eligible for NDIS, but for all children (including those who are only marginally less challenged than those who are eligible).

¹ The five domains are language and cognitive skills (school-based), physical health and wellbeing, social competence, communication skills and general knowledge, emotional maturity.

² Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022), 'Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021 Early Childhood Development in Australia', accessible at: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

³ NDIS (2023), NDIS Quarterly report to disability ministers, 21 December 2021.

For example, playgroups can address key goals identified in the NDIS review (while also reducing budgetary pressures) through:

- ✓ **Providing a supportive and inclusive environment for early development of social and emotional skills (regardless of NDIS eligibility).** Through play, children can develop skills in communication, sharing, taking turns and cooperation. This early skill building can potentially reduce the need for more intensive therapy later (see evidence of the impact of playgroup on child development outcomes in subsequent sections). *Playgroups not only reduce developmental vulnerability to children generally, but supported programs specifically target high risk cohorts.*

For example, the PlayConnect/PlayConnect+ program originally championed by PlayGroup Australia offers a range of supported playgroups for children with disabilities or developmental concerns (including ASD) – with positive outcomes fueling the program's grassroots spread. An independent evaluation of the PlayConnect program found it successfully provided benefits such as, better management of child behaviour, better confidence in parenting, and soft entry into other services. Additionally, there was unanimous agreement in the Facilitator Survey that PlayConnect engages children with ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns in appropriate play opportunities. The review also found the program “provides these benefits despite tight funding and resourcing, and that the program could be made more effective with additional support” and that recommending further and increased resourcing to continue and extend the program, including for further awareness and participation by parents not currently attending.⁴

Playgroups also offer support for children with disabilities and delays in mainstream settings, for example the PlayTogether program works with community playgroups to support them to become more inclusive and help families overcome barriers to playgroup participation. This includes the employment of Inclusion Officers (IOs) to support children and families with disabilities and/or developmental delays to participate in community playgroups, inclusion training and resources for playgroup staff, and inclusive playgroup events to build connections between local disability organisations, disability family organisations, families of children with disabilities and/or developmental delay and the playgroup community.

- ✓ **Increased parental empowerment and skill building.** The NDIS Review states that the early childhood approach was designed on best practice principles (which involve a family centered, capacity building approach, with support primarily being delivered in natural settings) – but that efforts to encourage families and the market to adopt this approach have failed. *Playgroups are unique from other early childhood settings in that they have a dual focus on supporting the development of both children and parents.*⁵ As such, they are a perfect environment to equip parents and families with the knowledge and skills to support their child's ongoing development in a natural setting. For example, the Peep Learning Together program is evidence-based adult-learning offered through playgroups that supports parents to learn more about how children learn and make changes in the home that make a difference to children's outcomes.
- ✓ **Earlier identification and intervention for children with developmental delays (including child development checks).** By providing opportunities for social interaction and guided play, playgroups can highlight areas where a child may need extra support and address these issues more quickly and more cost-effectively. *Playgroups are already delivering programs conducting*

⁴ ARACY (2020), 'PlayConnect Evaluation Final Report - March 2020', accessible at: <https://www.playgroupaustralia.org.au/resource/playconnect-evaluation/>

⁵ Commerford, J., and Robinson, E. (2016). Supported playgroups for parents and children: The evidence for their benefits (Child Family Community Australia)

child development checks with parents present and in a natural setting. For example, South Australia's *Ready, Set, Progress* program delivers free child development checks for children aged 12 months to 5 years in playgroups throughout the state. In its 18 months, the program conducted checks for over 800 children and provided targeted intervention activities and guidance from allied health professionals to support those identified as having developmental vulnerabilities (see below for more information).

- ✓ **Providing a 'soft entry point' to other services.** Families with children experiencing developmental delays often face significant hurdles. These hurdles include navigating a complex system of early intervention services, encompassing mainstream options, foundational supports, and the NDIS. These complexities can create delays in accessing crucial support, resulting in higher long-term costs. **Playgroups offer a cost-effective bridge to overcome these challenges.** By providing a natural and familiar setting, playgroups act as a soft entry point to early intervention. Playgroups also have a unique advantage in terms of unparalleled access to children in the presence of their family and parents - with approximately one-third of Australian children attending in 2021 (32.3% down from 36.4% in 2018). This impact is particularly strong in remote areas, where participation rates are over 40%.
- ✓ **Providing a more cost-effective and sustainable alternative to private clinic-based therapy.** The NDIS Review identified a challenge in that there has been a swing back to clinic-based therapy which does not necessarily align with best practice around family-centered services being delivered in natural settings. Supported playgroups, or community playgroups (particularly those with specialist therapists) can offer a cost-effective alternative to services offered in a clinical setting.

Music therapy is one example where therapeutic elements are being integrated into playgroups. The Sing&Grow Australia program delivers group music therapy to families in a natural setting by partnering with local community playgroups to integrate music therapy services within the community. It also supports parental capacity building having developed workshops for parents and playgroups to empower them to facilitate their own small music sessions using specially designed resources.⁶ This can be seen as a cost-effective alternative (or complement) to private music therapy, where private registered music therapists funded by the NDIS early childhood approach can cost \$193.99 an hour or \$290.99 per hour in remote settings.⁷

Playgroups also offer a unique advantage over clinic-based therapy in that they are a family-centered, natural setting to practice and develop social skills, this is particularly beneficial for children with ASD or ASD-like traits where play can be challenging, and interventions targeting play have been found to improve play.⁸ For example, the evaluation of the PlayConnect program found that *'unlike NDIS-funded therapeutic interventions, which tend to be delivered in a one-to-one model, PlayConnect encourages social interaction and peer-to-peer engagement for both the children attending and their families'* and that facilitators see PlayConnect and NDIS as part of the same toolbox of resources for families.

⁶ See <https://playmatters.org.au/sing-and-grow> for more detail.

⁷ NDIS (2023), 'Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits 2023-24', accessible at: <https://www.ndis.gov.au/media/6069/download?attachment>

⁸ ARACY (2020), 'PlayConnect Evaluation Final Report - March 2020', accessible at: <https://www.playgroupaustralia.org.au/resource/playconnect-evaluation/>

BEYOND THE NDIS: A MODEL PROGRAM OF FOUNDATIONAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY

Australia's PALS playgroups (Play and Learn Supported inclusive playgroups) offer a revolutionary approach to foundational mainstream support for children with disability or development delay. These inclusive playgroups successfully cater to children of all abilities, directly addressing the NDIS Review's call for increased investment in foundational programs delivered within mainstream and natural settings.

Funded by the NDIS Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program and delivered by Playgroup Australia partners, PALS aims to boost participation of families with disabilities in mainstream playgroups. It also strengthens the capacity of community organisations to offer inclusive services.

The program includes:

- **Inclusive groups:** 14x weekly 1.5 to 2-hour sessions with families with children aged 0-5 years, where half of the playgroup places are reserved for children with a disability and/or developmental delay (including NDIS participants) to ensure mixed ability groups.
- **Best practice play-based and developmentally appropriate support:** Programs are play and developmentally appropriate to achieve improved developmental outcomes for children.
- **Building ongoing community engagement and capacity:** Playgroups are designed around activities of community cultural, art, sport or recreational organisations (CASRs) to assist families (and CASRs) overcome barriers to community participation. Programs are co-designed by families and CASRs and are co-facilitated by a state and territory playgroup facilitator and CASR partner to ensure quality, and to build continued community capacity.
- **Transition supports to mainstream services:** Families participate for 6-months after which they can continue with the same PALS program, choose a different one, or transition to another supported playgroup, a community playgroup, or another local service. PALS facilitators, with their knowledge of community services and resources, can help families navigate services and find the best fit for their needs.

Proof it works...

In 2023, an independent evaluation of the PALS program was undertaken by Noah's Ark and RMIT University finding PALS playgroups as '*highly beneficial for the children's play and social skills*'. Specific benefits included:

- Improvements in children's speech and language skills, social-emotional skills, confidence and empathy.
- Improvements in children's physical development (particularly for playgroups that involved gross motor skills such as circus and jujitsu).

- Increased parental wellbeing, reduced isolation, improved parent-child interactions, and increased confidence for families of children with a disability in engaging in community programs.
- Increased community awareness of inclusion and increased capacity of CASRs to provide inclusive programs in the future, as well as positive attitudinal change towards inclusive practices and programs from parents of typically developing children.
- Better pathways for families to other mainstream and specialist child and family services, with engagement with other organisations reported to have increased.

Sustained investment in effective playgroup programs like PALS aligns perfectly with the NDIS Review's recommendations. This minimal investment approach strengthens early childhood foundational supports in a cost-effective way, minimising long-term burden on the NDIS.

PROOF IT WORKS: PLAYGROUPS IMPROVE CHILD DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES

Research demonstrates that attendance at playgroup improves child development outcomes and reduces developmental vulnerability. For example:

- **Children who attend playgroups are less likely to experience developmental delays.** A recent study by the University of South Australia looked at data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and found the odds of having one or more developmental vulnerabilities (including physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge) increases by 1.73 times in children that do not attend playgroup, compared to those who do. This was true even after considering factors like family background, and higher than the impact of attending daycare (0.95).

Playgroups were also found to reduce the risk of developmental vulnerability for children in the least advantaged socioeconomic areas, as well as children in outer regional and remote areas, often reducing the odds of developmental vulnerability by half.⁹

- **Systematic support for playgroups delivers increased benefits for children.** Lam et al (2023) also revealed that in jurisdictions where there is more systemic support for playgroups, and attendance is high (such as in Tasmania and South Australia), children who did not attend playgroups risked falling *even further behind* their attending peers - with those who do not attend playgroup doubling the odds of having one or more developmental vulnerabilities.

⁹ Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2023). Playgroups post pandemic, a snapshot of playgroup attendance and child development from 2012 to 2021. Commissioned report for Playgroup Australia.

- This is consistent with numerous other studies that have found a positive relationship between playgroup attendance and children's developmental outcomes. Hancock et al (2012) found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia who consistently attended playgroup performed significantly better on measures of learning competency (including social and emotional functioning for girls).¹⁰ A meta review of 34 studies (including 28 in Australia) found evidence of positive child outcomes from supported playgroups including improved language, cognition and behaviour skills.¹¹ Examples of other studies finding a link between playgroups and child development outcomes in Australia include: Telethon Kids Institute (2017) who find benefits across all domains of child development;¹² DEED (2012) who find stronger socialisation skills, emotional resilience and behavioural improvements;¹³ ARTD Consultants (2018) who find learning and socialization benefits;¹⁴ Jackson (2006)¹⁵ who finds reduced child separation anxiety and improved transition; Johnson (2004) who finds child socialisation benefits;¹⁶ Freiberg (2005) who finds improvement in child behaviour;¹⁷ and Hackworth (2013) who finds improved child language outcomes¹⁸ alongside others.¹⁹

PLAYGROUPS ARE UNIQUELY PLACED TO SUPPORT FAMILIES - FOSTERING A POSITIVE CYCLE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT THAT GOES BEYOND WHAT CHILDCARE ALONE CAN PROVIDE

It is not only children who are the beneficiaries of increased investment in playgroups, research has also found that playgroups provide parents and caregivers with the opportunity to build social connections, improve parenting skills and increase their knowledge of their children's development.²⁰ Consistent with the NDIS Review recommendations for a family-centered approach, this creates a positive cycle of learning where knowledge gained by parents from other parents and professionals is implemented in the home (which is often much more difficult to achieve in other ECEC environments).

¹⁰ Hancock, Kirsten; Lawrence, David; Mitrou, Francis; Zarb, David; Berthelsen, Donna; Nicholson, Jan; Zubrick, Stephen (2012). The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged four–five years in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(2), 72–81.

¹¹ Williams, K.E., Berthelsen, D., Viviani, M. et al. (2018) Facilitated Parent-child Groups as Family Support: A Systematic Literature Review of Supported Playgroup Studies. *J Child Fam Stud* 27, 2367–2383

¹² Gregory, T., Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2017). The reach of Playgroups across Australia and their benefits for children's development: A comparison of 2012 and 2015 AEDC data. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia

¹³ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, State of Victoria (DEECD). (2012). Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI) Outcomes Evaluation.

¹⁴ ARTD Consultants. (2008). Evaluation of the Playgroup Program. Final Report to the Department of Families, Housing, Community, Services and Indigenous Affairs.

¹⁵ Jackson, D. (2006). Playgroups as protective environments for refugee children at risk of trauma. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 31, 1–5

¹⁶ Johnson, L., & Sullivan, K. (2004). Evaluation of the Uniting Care Burnside Orana Supported Playgroups Program: Evaluation Report. Parramatta, Australia: Uniting Care Burnside.

¹⁷ Freiberg, K., Homel, R., Batchelor, S., Carr, A., Hay, I., Elias, G., & Lamb, C. (2005). Creating pathways to participation: A community-based developmental prevention project in Australia. *Children and Society*, 19, 144–157.

¹⁸ Hackworth, N. J., Nicholson, J. M., Matthews, J., Berthelsen, D., Cann, W., Westrupp, E. M., & Trajanovska, M. (2013). Early Home Learning Study: Overview and outcomes. Victoria, Australia: Parenting Research Centre for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

¹⁹ See Williams et al (2018) for more examples.

²⁰ Sincovich, A., Gregory, T., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. A. (2020). Exploring Associations Between Playgroup Attendance and Early Childhood Development at School Entry in Australia: A Cross-Sectional Population-Level Study. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(2), 475-503.

For example, playgroups have been found to:

- **Improve parental mental health and wellbeing.** Parents who attend playgroup have been found to have increased confidence, decreased stress, reduced social isolation, and improved mental health.²¹
- **Improve parenting skills and behaviour.** Research suggests that playgroups enhance parents' skills in supporting their child's learning,²² leading to increased confidence in their parenting abilities.²³ Additionally, playgroups can foster positive parenting behaviors that, in turn, contribute to a positive cycle of better developmental outcomes for children.²⁴
- **Build long lasting social support networks for parents (particularly mums).** Mothers whose children did not participate in playgroup were more than twice as likely to report a lack of social support when their child is primary school age.²⁵ Playgroups have also been found to support newly arrived refugee and migrant mums to overcome social and cultural barriers.^{26,27}
- **Improve the parent child relationship.** Playgroups have been found to result in higher parent responsiveness, enhance the quality of parent-child interactions, and lead to more positive parental perceptions of their children.²⁸

OPTIMISING OUTCOMES: PLAYGROUPS' SYNERGY OF EARLY INTERVENTION AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Early intervention is crucial for children with developmental delays and disability because the brain is most receptive to learning during the early years. Research has consistently found benefits from investment in early intervention. For example, a report as the result of a partnership between research, not-for-profit, philanthropy and business found that Australian Governments are spending \$15.2 billion each year on high-intensity and crisis services for problems that may have been prevented through early intervention programs (ranging from speech and emotional therapy to support for struggling parents).²⁹ In 2013, Synergies Economic Consulting found a \$11.3 dollar life-long benefit from every \$1 invested in early intervention for children with autism, with benefits including education, employment and

²¹ Williams, K.E. et al (2018)

²² Williams, K.E., Berthelsen, D., Viviani, M. et al. (2018) Facilitated Parent-child Groups as Family Support: A Systematic Literature Review of Supported Playgroup Studies. *J Child Fam Stud* 27, 2367–2383

²³ Commerford, J., and Robinson, E. (2016). Supported playgroups for parents and children: The evidence for their benefits (Child Family Community Australia)

Report No. 40). Canberra, Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

²⁴ Pourliakas, A., Sartore, G-M., Macvean, M. & Devine, B. (2016). Supported playgroups for children from birth to five years. Prepared for The Benevolent Society. Victoria: Parenting Research Centre in RMIT and Noah's Ark (2023).

²⁵ Hancock KJ, Cunningham NK, Lawrence D, Zarb D, Zubrick SR (2015) Playgroup Participation and Social Support Outcomes for Mothers of Young Children: A Longitudinal Cohort Study. *PLoS ONE* 10(7)

²⁶ New, R. (2012). African refugee mothers' experiences of their children's school readiness, and the role of supported playgroups. BA Dissertation. Edith Cowan University.

²⁷ Commerford, J., and Robinson, E. (2016). Supported playgroups for parents and children: The evidence for their benefits (Child Family Community Australia)

²⁸ METASTUDY

²⁹ Teager, W., Stafford, N., (2019), 'How Australia can invest in children and return more: A new look at the \$15bn cost of late action', accessible at: <https://colab.telethonkids.org.au/siteassets/media-docs---colab/coli/how-australia-can-invest-in-children-and-return-more---final-bn-not-embargoed.pdf>

independent living outcomes.³⁰ More recently, research by AEIOU found that every dollar of autistic-specific early intervention results in a societal return of \$6.16 to the community, and from that a direct cost saving of \$4.58 to the NDIS.³¹



The earlier the better: why early intervention before school is critical

The earlier a child with developmental delays receives intervention, the greater the benefit. The brain is most adaptable during the toddler years, with rapid development in areas like communication, motor skills, and social learning. Early intervention during this window capitalises on this plasticity.³²

Systematic reviews of the literature have consistently demonstrated that young children with developmental delays and disabilities (such as autism) benefit from earlier intervention.³³ For example a review of the literature by Landa (2018) finds that early intervention for children with ASD takes advantage of the early stages of brain development when new connections are being built based on a child's experiences, with signs being spotted as early as 3 months, and that many children with ASD experience decline in the second year of life, *'infants or toddlers showing concerning signs of social and communication delays or qualitatively atypical developmental patterns, despite being sub-threshold for an ASD diagnosis, should have access to early intervention or developmental enrichment programs (including parent coaching to immerse children in development-enhancing experiences to accelerate learning and generalization of skills)'*. However, Landa suggests that getting help for very young children can be difficult due to eligibility criteria to access programs which can be challenging to meet for children who have not yet received a diagnosis or those whose symptoms are less severe.

Early interventions that involve parents are more effective

Consistent with the NDIS Review, research has also shown that parents play a critical role in the success of early intervention, particularly given the substantially greater opportunities they have to influence a child's development and its cost-effective nature. However, often early intervention fails to actively engage parents.³⁴ This is consistent with the Autism CRC review of the literature on early intervention approaches for children with autism, which also highlighted the important role played by parents in early

³⁰ Synergies Economic Consulting (2013), Cost-benefit analysis of providing early intervention to children with autism, accessible at: https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/215266/sub0032-ndis-costs-attachmenta.pdf

³¹ AEIOU Foundation (2023), New research reveals cost benefit of autism-specific early intervention, Media release, 22 March 2023, accessible at: https://aeiou.org.au/files/blog/230322_media_release_cost_benefit_analysis_and_digital_portal.pdf

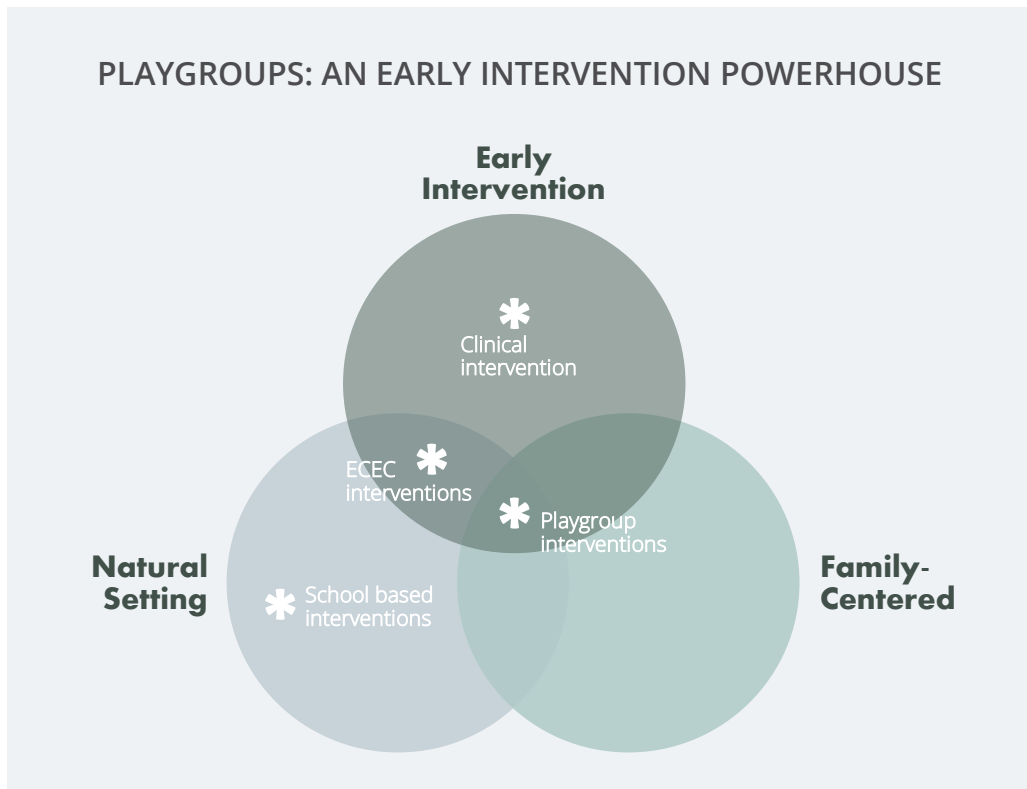
³² Guthrie, W., Wetherby, A. M., Woods, J., Schatschneider, C., Holland, R. D., Morgan, L., & Lord, C. E. (2023). The earlier the better: An RCT of treatment timing effects for toddlers on the autism spectrum. *Autism*, 27(8), 2295-2309.

³³ See Landa, R. (2018), 'Efficacy of early interventions for infants and young children with, and at risk for, autism spectrum disorders', *International Review of Psychiatry*, 30(1), 25-39

³⁴ Gerald Mahoney, Bridgette Wiggers (2007) The Role of Parents in Early Intervention: Implications for Social Work, *Children & Schools*, 29(1), Pages 7-15.

intervention, finding the outcomes were involved in the intervention can be *'greater than those delivered by clinical practitioner or educators alone.'*³⁵

Playgroups: a natural fit for early intervention



Playgroups embody the ideal environment for successful early intervention. They naturally address the crucial factors of timing, parental involvement, and application within a familiar and engaging setting. During a child's most receptive developmental years, playgroups provide a stimulating space for early learning while fostering active participation and collaboration from parents. This powerful combination creates a platform to maximise the impact of early intervention - leading to improved outcomes and cost-effectiveness for children with developmental delays and disabilities compared with alternative options.

³⁵Whitehouse, A., Varcin, K., Waddington, H., Sulek, R., Bent, C., Ashburner, J., Eapen, V., Goodall, E., Hudry, K., Roberts, J., Silove, N., Trembath, D. 2020. Interventions for children on the autism spectrum: A synthesis of research evidence. Autism CRC.

READY, SET, PROGRESS: A SUCCESSFUL MODEL OF EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

Playgroup South Australia, partnering with the South Australian Office for the Early Years, delivers a vital service for families. Their program provides free developmental checks and support for children aged 1-5, directly addressing the NDIS Review's call for improved mainstream screening. This allows for early identification of potential developmental concerns within a familiar setting.

The program also prioritises a family-centered approach, building parental capacity and offering foundational support that can significantly improve early intervention outcomes.

The key objectives of the program include:

- **Increased awareness** by parents/caregivers around the importance of child development checks.
- **Increased screening** of children using age-appropriate development checks (such as ASQ-3, ASQ:SE, ASQ-TRAK).
- **Provide early intervention and support** to families whose children are identified as developmentally vulnerable through early help and support sessions. These sessions provide early intervention support to families including scaffolding learning for parents to continue to support their child's development.

How it works...

A Child Development Screener from Playgroups SA arranges a time to visit selected playgroups, providing information to families, registering interest and providing interested families with the relevant Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ). In 2-3 weeks time, the screener meets with the family (e.g. at playgroup, Playgroups SA's head office or a local library/community centre) to collate the responses with the parents. Based on the responses, appropriate support is provided.

Proof it works...

Over the past 18 months, the Ready, Steady, Progress team has conducted developmental checks for over 800 children aged 1 to 5 years, across more than 151 metropolitan and regional sites. Over 1 in 5 (21.3%) of these children were identified as having developmental vulnerabilities and received targeted intervention activities and guidance from allied health professionals to support their development. 1 in 4 of these children were recommended for further assessment. Since November 2023, Playgroup SA's allied health team (including speech pathologists and occupational therapists) provided 46 individualised Early Help and Support Sessions to families of children identified with developmental vulnerabilities.

As a result, the program has received a high level of support not only from families, but also from schools and community organisations.

For example, Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) had 217 children screened through their Supported Playgroups in Catholic Education program (comprising 24% of the average number of children who attend each week). Of these, 31% were in the monitoring zone or had

parents who expressed concern and received follow up activities to carry out at home, and 12% were provided with a referral for further assessment. They are hoping that the program can continue.

"Families reported that they highly value the opportunity of having the CDC carried out within their 'safe' playgroup space and over 70% of families surveyed reported that they would be interested in having their child/ren screened at playgroup in 2024... CESA hopes to continue to promote the implementation of the Ready Set Progress Developmental Check program within our supported playgroups and aims to increase the number of supported playgroup children accessing CDC's

during playgroup sessions from 24% to 30-40% in 2024... we highly advocate for the continuation of the program until the end of 2024 and beyond" – CESA

Many other early childhood organisations have also expressed their support for the program, some examples include:

"[We want to] express our support for the continuation of funding for the Ready Set Progress Child Development Check Pilot Program. Our involvement in this program within KinderGym has allowed us to experience, firsthand the significant benefits it offers to children and families participating in our program... we believe that the continuation of this program is vital for the well-being and future prospects of our children... We advocate for its continued implementation and any opportunities for expansion, confident in the positive impact it will continue to have on the lives of children and families." – Somerton Park KinderGym

"My involvement in this program as coordinator of the playgroup has allowed me to experience firsthand the significant benefits it offers to children and families participating in our playgroup. This has included early identification of developmental variations in several of our children. It has also included information to help target our offered activities to particular areas of challenge common to several of our children (fine motor skill delay). The face to face support of families by the Ready Set Progress team was well received by families of children who required additional care." - Baby Connect Playgroup.

SMALL INVESTMENT WITH BIG IMPACT

Playgroups offer a wealth of benefits for all children, regardless of developmental stage. They provide a welcoming environment for typically developing children and those with disabilities or delays, all at an economical cost. Playgroup Australia has a strong and proven track record of delivering these inclusive programs, fostering positive outcomes even with limited resources. Research confirms this success, with existing playgroup evaluations consistently demonstrating their effectiveness. Increased investment would undoubtedly amplify these benefits.

The programs we propose for funding are no different. They are well-established and demonstrably effective in nurturing children's play, social skills, and overall development.

We are seeking \$10.3 million in funding (\$43 million over 4 years), including:

- \$1.5 million to continue the proven PALS and PlayTogether programs (initially funded through the NDIS Linkages and Capacity Building, and subsequently funded through to 2024 DSS grants³⁶) (\$6.4 million over 4 years).
- \$8.7 million to extend the already successful SA-based Ready, Steady, Progress program nationally (\$36.6 million over 4 years).

Extension of the PALS and PlayTogether programs

"It's been wonderful ... this is actually an inclusive play group. And so, I didn't have to feel like I was being judged or being worried about being judged."

"I think it was really good that we were able to go to a playgroup that did have kids with disabilities. I think it was a bit of, like, a learning experience for both of us."

"It's really important that the other children in the playgroup understand that not everyone's the same. And to see people with individual differences is really important ... that they're part of our society."

- Parents of children attending PALS and PlayTogether programs

Continuing the successful PALS and PlayTogether programs for another four years would require an estimated \$4.0 million and \$2.4 million, respectively.

³⁶ Playgroups Australia initially received funding for the PALS and PlayTogether programs from the NDIA's Information and Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program. In October 2020, the ILC program transferred to DSS and the PlayTogether and PALS programs were subsequently deemed suitable for an extension of time and additional funding to June 30, receiving an Individual capacity building grant and Economic and community participation grant.

We estimate that this would allow the PALS program to deliver organisational capacity building for community and social inclusion to 100 organisations, as well as individual capacity building to 760 people with disabilities and their families (190 people with a disability), annually.

It would also allow the PlayTogether program to build community capacity, train playgroup staff (~50) and deliver approximately 80 inclusion events (reaching approximately 11,500 families).

4 year forward estimates

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
PALS	948,471	976,925	1,006,233	1,036,420	3,968,049
PlayTogether	575,192	592,448	610,222	628,528	2,406,390

National extension of the Ready, Steady, Progress program

While there is a strong desire for early developmental checks, evidenced by waitlists at many organisations, many parents may lack awareness of their existence or importance. This is particularly concerning for vulnerable populations, including those in rural and remote regions. For example, in Tasmania, an organisation offering checks has closed its books for 2025 due to high demand.

There is also an increasing need for additional assessment. For example, the percentage of children being identified by teachers as requiring further assessment in the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) has increased over 50% since 2021 (from 10.5% in 2012 to 16.3% in 2021, with a sharp increase from 13.3% in 2018). This is likely due to many children who could benefit from early intervention missing out due to lack of screening.

Playgroups Australia, with its established network, can collaborate with the government to raise awareness about the importance of developmental checks, as well as to identify and reach vulnerable communities (such as those in regional and remote regions) that might have difficulty accessing traditional developmental check services.

“Our 5-year-old son has recently received funding through the NDIS early childhood approach due to social and emotional delays. We suspect he has autism. He attends a psychologist, occupational therapist and group therapy that assists him to build his social skills.

His developmental delays were pointed out to us by his teacher when he attended 4-year-old kindy. In hindsight, there were a lot of signs we missed as parents that likely would have been picked up earlier had he been screened in the playgroup he attended.

If they had been picked up, we could have got him the help he is now receiving much earlier. We wish we would have known about developmental screening and that this program had been available to us in our state.”

- A former playgroup parent to a child on the NDIS

The Ready, Steady, Progress program strengthens the existing child development assessment strategy, which currently includes the 3-yearly AEDI for children entering their first year of school and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in year 3. This combined effort can ensure a more equitable and comprehensive system for identifying developmental delays and supporting early childhood development. It aligns perfectly with the broader goal of universally accessible development checks in early childhood.

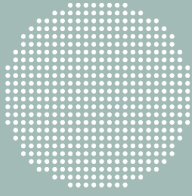
Expanding it to a national program would require an estimated initial investment of \$8.7 million, with a total cost of \$36.6 million over four years.

Funding for a national extension of the Ready, Steady, Progress program includes:

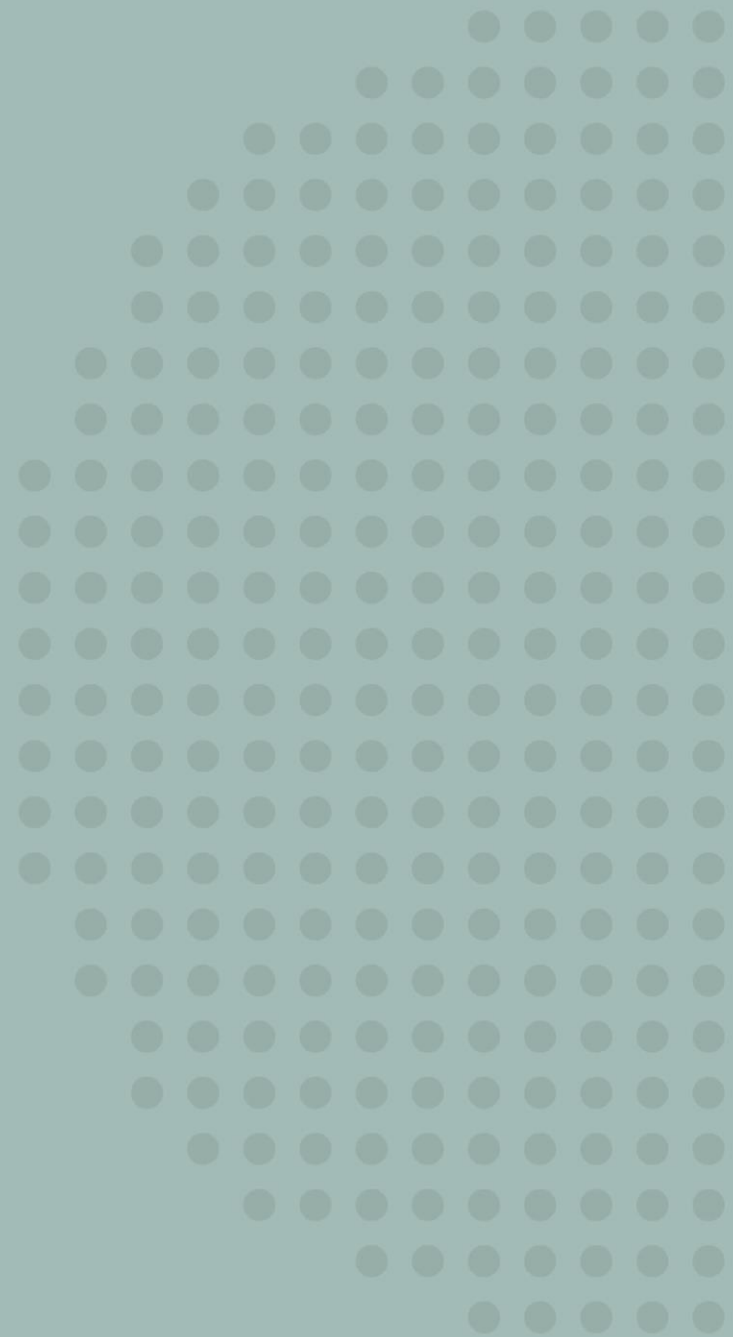
- Screening for 1 in 5 children attending playgroups in each state or territory each year (approximately 78,000 children over 4 years) – targeting the most vulnerable populations first.
- Salaries for program managers, project support officers and qualified child development assessors.
- Training for child development assessors in using a standardised and validated development instrument.
- Licensing to use the instrument.
- Early help and support sessions for children identified as having developmental vulnerabilities and their families.
- A database system to securely record developmental assessments.
- Transport and logistical costs for child development assessors to attend playgroups.

4 year forward estimates





Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
8,743,522	9,005,828	9,276,003	9,554,283	36,579,637



EQUITY ECONOMICS



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