



Brotherhood of St Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

Supporting children where they live, learn and play

Foundational Supports for children with developmental concerns, delay and/or disability, their families, caregivers and kin

Brotherhood of St. Laurence

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Summary

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) welcomes the consultation on Foundational Supports for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability. For the Foundational Supports Strategy to realise the vision of a disability supports ecosystem that will support a more sustainable NDIS, there needs to be adequate investment in Foundational Supports to meet the needs of the disability community. Alongside this, there needs to be appropriate investment in mainstream services to ensure they are inclusive and accessible for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability.

In developing this submission BSL consulted with a wide range of staff across our Disability Services and Children, Youth and Inclusion portfolios to ensure we were reflecting the realities that families experience when seeking support for their children.

BSL notes that the Australian Government has still not formally responded to the NDIS Review and have committed to releasing their response by the end of 2024. It is critical that the government advance NDIS reforms in a clear and coherent manner.

BSL also notes the need for the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the state/territory governments to include investment in Foundational Supports and early years integrated services. This includes:

- appropriate resourcing of Foundational Supports for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability to meet demand
- investing in Early Years Integrated Service models that include:

- providing families with the information, advice and referrals they need, when and where they need it
- providing tailored advice to families in an accessible way and, if possible, through a Lead Practitioner
- providing peer support, particularly for families with children with developmental differences and/or disability
- investing in support for inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings to ensure mainstream services are accessible for children with developmental concern, delay or disability
- investing in evidence-based early interventions such as Targeted Foundational Supports including one-on-one support with families.

1 The Brotherhood of St. Laurence and supports for children and families

BSL is a social justice organisation working towards an Australia free of poverty. Our purpose is to advance a fair Australia through our leadership on policy reform, our partnerships with communities and the quality of our services. Our approach is informed directly by people experiencing disadvantage and uses evidence drawn from our research, together with insights from our programs and services, to develop practical solutions that work.

BSL works towards achieving our vision of an Australia free of poverty through demonstrating and delivering effective responses and building compelling evidence for policy and practice reform and systems change. Supportive and inclusive early years services are critical to realising this vision – which includes putting children and families at the centre of the early childhood development system, creating cohesive services and systems, and ensuring there is universal access to early childhood development services for all children and families.

In line with this vision, BSL has operated as a NDIS Partner in the Community (PITC) since 2016. We are contracted by the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) to deliver Local Area Coordination (LAC) and the early childhood approach in Victoria across the North Eastern Melbourne, Hume/Merri-bek, Brimbank/Melton, Western Melbourne and Bayside Peninsula areas. This work includes building community capacity and inclusiveness through place-based projects.

BSL also operates a range of children and family services across Australia including early years integrated services, the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY), the Jindi Family and Community Centre, Supported and Multicultural playgroups and other integrated service offerings.

2 NDIS Reforms need to be advanced in a coherent and coordinated manner

BSL welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Foundational Supports Strategy and the design and implementation of Foundational Supports for children with developmental concern,

delay and/or disability. However, BSL notes that that this submission has been prepared without a formal response to the NDIS Review.

Government must respond to the review findings to ensure reforms are advanced in a coherent, coordinated and transparent manner. Currently, the government has undertaken significant reforms to the NDIS changing people's use of NDIS funding and eligibility to the scheme, which is already resulting in significant numbers of children aged 5–9 years having their access to the scheme revoked.¹ At the same time, ECEC settings and schools have not received additional funding to support more inclusive practices.

In the absence of coordinated oversight and resourcing of the entire disability services and support ecosystem, there is also a risk of mainstream services being unable to manage increased demand, and early childhood educators and teachers being expected to fill the gaps in inclusion support. This could have a detrimental effect on the inclusion of children with disability in these settings for years to come. These reforms are occurring in an order that risks leaving people with disability without the supports they need, and risks derailing the vision of a disability supports ecosystem.

Recommendation 1: BSL recommends the government advance reforms to the disability supports ecosystem in a clear and coherent manner.

3 Foundational Supports for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability need to be appropriately resourced

BSL welcomes the introduction of Foundational Supports for children and families to work alongside the NDIS and support scheme sustainability. In order to ensure Foundational Supports meet this vision it is critical that they are resourced to meet demand.

There are no current estimates of the level of unmet needs for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability or what types of support would best meet those needs. However, emerging research suggests the level of unmet need is high. The NDIS Review highlighted that one-in-five children in Australia has a disability or developmental concern, whereas 8% of young school-aged children are NDIS participants indicating that demand for services outside of the NDIS is likely high.²

The recent Senate Estimates highlighted the volume of reassessments that the NDIA are currently completing – an estimated 1200 eligibility reassessments per week with 80% of these children between five and nine years old.³ From the NDIA estimates of the six weeks prior to the Senate

¹ Parliament of Australia (2024), *2024-25 Supplementary Budget Estimates Transcript*. Wednesday 6 November 2024. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Senate_estimates/ca/2024-25_Supplementary_budget_estimates

² NDIS Review (2024), *"Final Report – working together to deliver the NDIS."* Available at: <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/reports/working-together-deliver-ndis>
[SMH Article on children in NDIS](#)

³ Parliament of Australia (2024), *2024-25 Supplementary Budget Estimates Transcript*. Wednesday 6 November 2024. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Senate_estimates/ca/2024-25_Supplementary_budget_estimates

Estimates, 48% of these reassessments resulted in access being revoked.⁴ It is likely that many children who are having their NDIS access revoked will access to Targeted Foundational Supports, indicating again that demand is likely to be high.

Recommendation 2: BSL recommends that the federal and state/territory governments ensure that Foundational Supports for children and their families/caregivers are appropriately resourced to meet demand.

3 Early years integration services

Integrated policy development with children and families at the centre is essential to ensuring cohesive, effective and impactful service delivery across federal, state and local government. When policies are aligned, resources can be better coordinated to address the complex and interconnected needs of families such as education, health, employment and community connections.

This approach reduces duplication, fills service gaps and creates a seamless experience for families navigating support systems. It also promotes long-term outcomes such as improved child development, stronger family resilience and enhanced community wellbeing. By working together across all levels of government, stakeholders can create a unified vision in context of local communities, that prioritises inclusion and equity, fosters collaboration and ensures every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Access to the full range of early years services is essential to a good start in life, however, there are currently many barriers making it difficult for families to access what they need – particularly families experiencing poverty. This includes not only early learning, but also the whole suite of early childhood development services, together with maternal and child health, allied health, parenting support, financial wellbeing and community connections.

Early years integrated services can provide a gateway to many types of supports that families may require, including information, advice and referrals, peer support through supported playgroups and parenting supports, inclusive mainstream supports such as ECEC. Integrated early years services can also be a place to deliver Targeted Foundational Supports, however, these can also be delivered separately.

BSL's Early Years Integrated Service model aims to overcome barriers to Foundational Supports, by harnessing the strengths in the relationship between workers and families. Through these connections families are empowered to expand capabilities, navigate services and build resources that promote their children's development and wellbeing.

BSL has designed an Early Years Integrated Service model in response to the above needs that will be launching in 2025. This model is grounded in four key components that includes: early childhood development, parent education, community engagement and policy influence.

These components work in harmony to deliver a cohesive and dynamic model that is:

- **Flexible** by adapting to the unique and evolving needs of diverse communities.
- **Responsive** by providing timely and effective support for children and families.

⁴ Ibid

- **Sustainable** by ensuring long-term impact through reshaping resource allocation.
- **Comprehensive** by addressing the interconnected needs of children, families and communities.

The model is designed to connect children experiencing disadvantage with high-quality early learning, tailored supports and culturally responsive services while empowering parents to navigate local systems.

Recommendation 3: BSL recommends that the federal and state/territory governments co-invest in early years integrated services to support better outcomes for families.

Seeking information, advice and referrals

BSL welcomes the focus on providing families with the information they need to support their children. As part of the development of this submission BSL undertook consultation with our Disability Services staff, in particular our Early Childhood Coordinators (ECCs), who work closely with families, to gain their insights. Through this consultation, ECCs highlighted the key channels through which families seek information, advice and referrals:

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| • Family members. | • Community noticeboards. |
| • Peers (other families). | • Allied Health Professionals. |
| • General Practitioners. | • Community Health Groups. |
| • Maternal Child Health Nurse. | • The Raising Children Network website. |
| • ECEC centres. | • General Practitioners and other health professionals. |
| • Kindergartens/preschools. | • Disability advocacy organisations. |
| • New Parents groups. | • Disability-specific websites (e.g. Amaze for autism resources). |
| • Parent support groups. | |
| • Social media and online networks. | |

BSL staff also highlighted the importance of meeting families where they are at and providing timely information relevant to their circumstances. This also includes providing family-centred supports that are strengths based, as well as culturally responsive services for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families.

Staff also raised that there can be a gap between families receiving information, advice and referrals and taking the next step. This can be for reasons such as needing time to process the information, ableist attitudes, lack of available or affordable services or other personal circumstances. This highlights that the right time to receive information may vary from family to family, and it is critical to take a family-centred approach to providing information, advice and referrals, and support families to understand and action the information.

As highlighted in the sources of information, advice and referrals listed above, many families seek advice from programs/services with which they are already connected. This is reflected in BSL's experience of delivering early years and family services – and further highlights the value of early years integrated services as a gateway to the supports families need.

Recommendation 4: BSL recommends providing information, advice and referrals through services with which families are already connected such as early years integrated services.

Barriers to accessing information, advice and referrals

BSL staff also highlighted that significant barriers to accessing information, advice and referrals exist for some families. These include:

- **Accessibility:** Information and advice is often not provided in an accessible format – relevant information should be made accessible in a number of ways including providing Easy English documents, videos with closed captioning, Auslan interpreting and in languages other than English.
- **Ableism:** Ableism and stereotypes about disability or developmental differences are common and are often reinforced through information and advice that is provided – this may appear as using deficit language and/or referring to child/ren as a burden.
- **Cost:** Seeking information and advice, particularly through the medical system, can have significant out-of-pocket costs which can make it prohibitive for families to access.
- **Medical gaslighting:** When seeking advice, families may experience doctors or other medical professionals dismissing or downplaying their concerns which can hinder families seeking further information.
- **Mistrust:** Families who are newly arrived in Australia may have a mistrust of government due to experiences in their country of origin. This may also occur for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families due to the lack of cultural safety or racism they have experienced from the health, education and/or other systems.⁵
- **Lack of proof of identity documentation:** BSL staff noted that some families may not have access to the proof of identity documentation necessary to access supports. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were reported to be more likely to face this barrier.
- **Information overload or conflicting information:** BSL staff also noted the importance of receiving information and advice from a single source of truth, as many families have experienced receiving an overwhelming amount of information, or conflicting information from different professionals.
- **Family and domestic violence:** BSL staff noted that family and domestic violence can create barriers for families in seeking further support for their child/ren with developmental concern, delay and/or disability. For example, if a family member could be using coercive control to restrict access to services or families could be experiencing crisis and so be unable to access services at that time.

In addition to the above barriers, it is also necessary to include a proactive outreach strategy in information provision as some families may not know how to recognise developmental milestones

⁵ANTAR (2021), “Racism in Healthcare.” Available at: <https://antar.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Racism-in-Healthcare-Backgrounder.pdf>

or disability or may not be aware of evidence-based supports for child/ren with developmental concern, delay or disability.

In response to the above barriers, using a Lead Practitioner role (also known as a Key Worker) can support families in overcoming some of the barriers. The Lead Practitioner model can support a family to build a trusting relationship with one professional who can provide tailored information and advice in a way that is most suitable for the family. This role will be critical in BSL's delivery of early years integrated services from 2025.

Recommendation 5: BSL recommends that the Foundational Supports Strategy ensures that families are provided with tailored information and advice relevant to their situation that is in an accessible format and, where possible, provided through a Lead Practitioner.

The power of peer support

BSL welcomes the focus on peer support as a key pillar of General Foundational Supports. As mentioned above, early years integrated services can be a gateway for access to peer support for families. Peer support is critical for all people with disability, and particularly important for families with children with developmental differences or disability.

This is reflective of emerging findings from our Early Childhood Primary Service Provider pilot program (see section five for the pilot overview), which indicate that family isolation is one of the key challenges families in the pilot program are experiencing. Pilot Lead Practitioners have been responding to this challenge by connecting families with playgroups, particularly culturally specific playgroups, mainstream services and/or other forms of peer support to promote connection and strengthen formal and informal supports.

Aside from disability-specific peer support, BSL has long-standing experience with peer-support models for families through HIPPY. HIPPY has undergone extensive worldwide research into its effectiveness, in particular the peer tutoring model that the program implements (see overview below for more detail). This has found the tutor–parent relationship to be essential in reducing parents' isolation, providing a source of support, and helping some families stay involved in the program.⁶ In addition to valuing the regular contact with their home tutor, parents also valued the understanding and encouragement they received from both tutors and coordinators, particularly during 'tough times':

The home tutor provides a lifeline to the parent. – Parent

Parents like having someone to talk to for support and social connection. – Home tutor⁷

⁶ The Centre for Community Child Health 2015. *HIPPY Australia: curriculum and program mapping project*. Available at: https://assets.hippyaustralia.bsl.org.au/assets/LMS-files/151020_HIPPY_Mapping_Final_Report_V1_1.pdf

⁷ BSL 2014. *Recruiting and retaining families in HIPPY: Final Report*. Available at: https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/6141/1/DialloRoost_et_al_Recruiting_and_retaining_families_in_HIPPY_2014.pdf

Research has also shown that the positive relationship tutors develop with parents in HIPPY lays the necessary foundation to build parental capacity and confidence, including nurturing the skills of parents to plan for and reflect on their child's learning, and to develop responsive parent-child relationships. Tutors who are attuned to the needs of families are able to deliver support and resources in a meaningful, engaging and responsive manner.⁸

The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)

The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) is a two-year, home-based early learning and parenting program. HIPPY is voluntary and free for families, and includes activity packs, storybooks and other learning resources based on the notion of 'everywhere learning'. It is designed to be integrated into daily life, with families spending around 10–15 minutes a day doing play-based educational activities together.

Through HIPPY, parents and caregivers are supported to foster their child's love of learning using play-based activities. Parents are also supported to become advocates in their child's education by expanding their understanding of their child's development and learning, as well as the expectations of formal education, such as preschool and school.

In addition to improved learning outcomes for children, the program also offers some parents and carers a paid and supported pathway to employment as tutors. Tutors help other parents become comfortable teaching the curriculum through a peer-to-peer model. As part of the two-year role, tutors are offered training pathways tailored to their personal employment and training goals.

Playgroups are also another key form of peer support offered through early years integrated services for both parents/caregivers and for children with developmental concern, delay and/or disability. BSL ECC staff highlighted the value of supported playgroups, particularly those accessible to multicultural families, in supporting social inclusion and improving informal supports for families.

Recommendation 6: BSL recommends that the federal and state/territory governments co-invest in peer-support models in early years integrated services that work to reduce social isolation, and improve informal and formal supports for families.

Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care settings

As part of an early years integrated services, and alongside General and Targeted Foundational Supports for families delivered in natural settings (which may include delivery in early childhood settings), ECEC settings must be inclusive for children with developmental concerns, delay and/or disability. The NDIS Review highlighted that one-in-five children in Australia has a disability or developmental concern,⁹ meaning that almost all early childhood teachers and educators will work with children with developmental concern or disability. Accordingly, inclusion must be part of business as usual rather than the exception.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ NDIS Review (2024), "*Final Report – working together to deliver the NDIS.*" Available at: <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/resources/reports/working-together-deliver-ndis>

The Productivity Commission's recent report on the ECEC sector highlighted that many children with developmental differences or disability are being excluded or restricted in the number of hours they can attend ECEC.¹⁰ This was reinforced by our consultation with ECCs who said that restriction in attendance is still a common occurrence for families they work with and impacts not only the child/ren's ability to socialise and learn but also the parents/caregivers' ability to work regular hours.

In order to ensure ECEC settings are inclusive there needs to be considerable investment, particularly to provide ECEC educators and teachers with professional development that focuses on inclusion support and early intervention alongside time to plan for the pedagogical approach and build relationships with the children, their families and allied health professionals.

The Productivity Commission report also recommended a new approach to inclusion to support better outcomes for children, through enhanced and expanded needs-based funding rather than child-specific funding like the Inclusion Support Program (ISP).¹¹ BSL supports the Productivity Commission's recommendation to ensure our mainstream systems are inclusive and accessible for children with developmental concern, delay or disability.

Recommendation 7: BSL recommends that federal and state/territory governments co-invest in inclusion in ECEC settings through needs-based funding, and support teachers and educators with the professional development and time to implement inclusion strategies.

5 Targeted Foundational Supports for children with developmental differences and their families

BSL welcomes a focus on Targeted Foundational Supports that are specialised, evidence-based early interventions. It is critical that investment for Targeted Foundational Supports is in evidence-based programs delivered in natural settings where children live, learn and play.

Early Childhood Primary Service Provider pilot

BSL launched the Early Childhood Primary Service Provider project, a one-year pilot program, in January 2024. The project is being delivered to approximately 150 families in Brimbank and Melton, in Melbourne's west, to support families with children aged 0–5 with developmental concerns who are not currently accessing the NDIS.

The pilot provides families with up to 20 hours of support in natural settings that includes providing information and advice, identifying and addressing goals and needs, advocacy and service coordination.

The project aims to:

- deliver sustainable and strengthened informal and formal supports to families
- promote meaningful participation in family and community life, including access to universal services

¹⁰ Productivity Commission (2024), *A path to universal early childhood education and care, Volume 2 - Supporting papers*. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report>

¹¹ *ibid*.

- pilot elements of the proposed Lead Practitioner model recommended in the NDIS Review.

Early insights from the pilot have highlighted a demonstrated need for targeted support, and that the model is effective in building the capacity of parents to set and achieve goals with their children. Families have shared this feedback:

- **Emotional support:** Many parents appreciate having someone to talk to and lean on, which has provided reassurance and guidance.
- **Practical strategies:** The program has offered practical strategies for responding to children's emotions, improving communication, and supporting learning and development.
- **Community connections:** Connecting with playgroups and other community resources has been beneficial for both parents and children.
- **Specialist support:** Assistance with enrolling in schools and ECEC and navigating disability and allied health services has been invaluable for some families.
- **Parental confidence:** The program has helped parents feel more confident in their parenting practices and in supporting their children's needs.

The most helpful thing about the program has been the strategies we decide on and try together. We see our coordinator two times per month and we are happy with this as we need time to try out the strategies in between sessions so we can work on something else the next time we see her. – Parent participating in the pilot

Impact comes from helping facilitate a more connected relationship between parents and educators (and sometimes other services involved with the family) so they are all on the same page and working toward the same goals. – ECC working on the pilot

Pilot case study: Vinh, 3 years old

Vinh was referred to the Early Childhood Primary Service Provider pilot by his Maternal and Child Health Nurse. She was concerned by his communication skills and felt his caregivers would benefit from in-home and regular supports. Through goal setting and mapping the supports around the child and family, it became apparent that Vinh had few toys or books to play with at home. He spent most of the day on his tablet and his parents didn't tend to play or engage with him.

The ECC supported the mum to register with the local 'Small Talk Playgroup' and they attended the first session together along with an interpreter. The coordinator and parent practised the strategy discussed at the playgroup which centred on following Vinh's lead and getting on the floor face-to-face with him to play.

After practising with the coordinator at home, Vinh's mum said she felt comfortable attending the playgroup weekly for the rest of the term independently. Their continuing sessions at home would focus on Vinh playing and communicating and practising strategies she was learning at the playgroup.

Recommendation 8: BSL recommends that the federal and state/territory governments co-invest in one-on-one early supports for families with children with developmental differences.

6 Next steps

As DSS creates the Foundational Supports Strategy, BSL would welcome the opportunity to meet with the DSS team to share our experience, research and evidence. Discussion could include how BSL's work, insights and networks in early childhood, peer support and the pilot projects we are undertaking to test elements of the NDIS Review recommendations, can contribute to the Strategy.