



# **BUILDING TRUST AND DRIVING CHANGE. A COMMUNITY LED VISION FOR THRIVING KIDS.**

Amaze submission to the House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability's Inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative.

2 October 2025

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## ABOUT AMAZE

**Amaze is a leading autism organisation driving change so that Autistic people and their families can live their best lives in a more autism inclusive Australia.**

For more than 50 years, Amaze has supported Autistic people, their families, and the broader community. While based in Victoria, our reach is national. We are home to Autism Connect – Australia’s first and only national autism helpline – which provides free, evidence-informed support to anyone in Australia.

We work closely with governments, partner organisations, employers, and community groups to deliver vital information, training, and advice to the autism community and beyond. Through Amaze Inclusion, we support workplaces, education providers and service systems to become more inclusive, respectful and responsive to the needs of Autistic people and neurodivergent people. Our work includes tailored training, advisory services and co-designed programs that build capability, shift attitudes and embed inclusive practice.

Across all areas, our work is informed by research, grounded in lived experience, and shaped by what the autism community tells us matters most. Alongside providing high-quality support and building broader understanding of autism, we translate community experiences into policy advice and systems-change efforts that aim to create lasting impact.

Our vision is inspired, and our ambitions significant. Our five strategic priorities (2022–2026) – Autism Assessment and Diagnosis, Education and Training, Employment, NDIS, and Health and Mental Health – reflect the areas where we believe change will make the greatest impact for Autistic people, their families and the wider community.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Thriving Kids initiative presents a critical opportunity to strengthen Foundational Supports for children with disability and developmental delay, along with their families and carers.** To be effective, the initiative must address longstanding gaps in access, equity, and inclusion. It must ensure that all children can receive timely, evidence-informed supports, regardless of NDIS status, location and financial capacity. Embedding neurodiversity-affirming principles and an intersectional lens, while aligning with national disability strategies, will be key to building trust and delivering meaningful change.

**The announcement of the Thriving Kids initiative came at a difficult time for our community.** A recent survey by Amaze (in partnership with I CAN Network, Aspergers Victoria, Different Journeys and Yellow Ladybugs) indicated that many Autistic people and their families and carers are already experiencing anxiety and confusion about the roll out of NDIS reforms. Many responders reported associated impacts on their engagement with services, community access and/or health and mental health.

**Many questions remain outstanding,** including the cohort of children Thriving Kids is intended to support (“mild” and “moderate” autism are not diagnostic terms), the commitment of States and Territories and the types of supports to be provided under the initiative. A considerable amount work, undertaken in co-design with stakeholders, including Autistic people and their families and carers, will be required to create a service system and workforce capable of meeting our community’s needs.

**As a first step, we recommend linking Thriving Kids with Australia’s key disability frameworks, including the National Autism Strategy, adopting shared goals, guiding principles, and inclusive language.** Integrating these frameworks will promote consistency, equity, and accountability across service systems. It will also drive a co-design approach, vision for inclusion and commitment to neurodiversity-affirming, accessible and culturally safe services and supports, avoiding outdated or exclusionary practices and language.

**The Thriving Kids initiative should invest in scaling up and developing new services and supports that are robustly and independently assessed as evidence-informed, neurodiversity-affirming, and shaped by lived experience.** Trusted models such as Autism Connect, Australia’s free national autism helpline delivered by Amaze and staffed by professionals with lived experience, demonstrate the power of inclusive, evidence informed support in empowering families and building trust. Similarly, targeted supports like PlayConnect playgroups—which provide inclusive early childhood environments for children with disability or developmental delay—may offer foundations for national expansion. Peer support programs such as Autism Peer Assist and the I CAN Network’s Autistic-led mentoring programs further highlight the value of tailored, community led supports in improving wellbeing and inclusion. Mechanisms for a seamless transition through relevant services and supports will be essential, including via trained navigators and peer support.

**A comprehensive, co-designed workforce strategy will be needed to ensure equitable delivery and outcomes,** while addressing current inconsistencies in autism-related expertise within and across sectors and the current fragmentation of supports for Autistic children and their families and carers. The strategy must be sustainable, scalable, and responsive to

emerging needs, ensuring all families have access to well-trained, neuro-affirming, and accountable service providers. To address already thin markets, it must incentivise professionals to work within the Thriving Kids system and importantly, create pathways for people with disability to join and lead in the Thriving Kids workforce.

**Measuring success** through an Outcomes Framework aligned with national strategies will be essential to ensuring the initiative meets the needs of all eligible children, families, and carers.

**Our key recommendations include:**

- Extend timeframes and commit to meaningful co-design with Autistic people, families and carers through a national community engagement framework.
- Apply an intersectional and equity lens to all aspects of design and delivery, prioritising disadvantaged and hard to reach cohorts.
- Link national and state disability and autism policy frameworks, including the National Autism Strategy, to the design and implementation of Thriving Kids.
- Ensure Thriving Kids services and resources are fully accessible, with no co-payments or cost-shifting.
- Co-design and fund a national framework of General Supports to be delivered by a network of trusted organisations.
- Guarantee the quality of Thriving Kids services and resources, including through applying transparent quality and ethics assessments to any services or resources to be delivered under the initiative.
- Ensure no children are denied NDIS access and referred to Foundational Supports until Thriving Kids is accessible and capable of meeting the needs of eligible children.
- Deliver choice and control over targeted supports across home, early learning, school and community settings.
- Build workforce capacity through a national workforce strategy with accredited training and lived experience leadership.
- Fund trained navigators and peer mentors to guide transitions and support family wellbeing.
- Develop a robust Outcomes Framework, aligned with national strategies and supported by transparent data collection and evaluation.

We welcome any further opportunity to discuss our submission and share our learnings and expertise, including those gained through the delivery of Autism Connect. Please contact me on (03) 9657 1600 or by email at [david.tonge@amaze.org.au](mailto:david.tonge@amaze.org.au).

Yours sincerely,



David Tonge  
Chief Executive Officer

Endorsed  
by:



## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Co-design a Thriving kids initiative that builds trust and leaves no child behind.**

1. Ensure the experiences and perspectives of people with disability and their families and carers, are at the centre and inform the future of Thriving Kids.
2. Ensure no child is denied access to the NDIS or removed from the scheme and referred to Foundational Supports until the new system is accessible and capable of meeting support needs.
3. Co-design a longer roll out timetable to deliver a neuro-affirming, evidence informed and trusted Foundational Supports system and Thriving Kids initiative.
4. Encourage the Australian and State and Territory governments to share more information about Thriving Kids, including State and Territory commitments and the cohort of children Thriving Kids will support.

### **Link Thriving Kids with key policy frameworks, including the National Autism Strategy.**

5. Link national and state disability and autism policy frameworks, including the National Autism Strategy, to the design and implementation of Thriving Kids, ensuring shared goals, guiding principles, language, commitments to equity, integrated and aligned approaches to service system reform, and aligned accountability and outcomes.
6. Cease the use of outdated terms, such as “mild” and “moderate” autism, to identify a cohort of children which may be supported by Thriving Kids.

### **Co-design an initiative and service system where all kids thrive.**

7. Develop and implement a National Community Engagement and Co-Design Framework to ensure all aspects of the Thriving Kids initiative are shaped through accessible, inclusive, and meaningful engagement with people with disability, families, carers, and other stakeholders.
8. Ensure the Thriving Kids Advisory Group includes a diversity of members with lived experience, including Autistic people and their family members and carers.
9. Apply a robust intersectional and equity lens, reflecting commitments and priority cohorts identified in the National Autism Strategy.
10. Co-design and fund a national framework of General Supports to be delivered by a network of trusted organisations under the Thriving Kids initiative, including cohort specific supports and supports tailored to the needs of priority cohorts.
11. Embed early identification and screening processes across universal and public early intervention services and improve access to diagnosis.
12. Undertake an independent assessment, including an ethics assessment of any existing and proposed services and resources to be delivered/scaled under *Thriving Kids*, identifying whether they are neurodiversity affirming, trauma-informed, culturally inclusive, grounded in evidence and lived experience, and embed measures of success.

13. Fund guaranteed, demand-driven access to Targeted Supports for all eligible children under the initiative, with no co-payments or cost-shifting to families.
14. Ensure children and families retain choice and control over the Targeted Services they receive and the settings in which they are delivered.
15. Pilot Thriving Kids services and supports, including in rural and remote areas and for priority cohorts, prior to full roll out.
16. Ensure general Thriving Kids services are inclusive of all children with disability, regardless of NDIS eligibility, diagnosis and support needs.
17. Design Thriving Kids to recognise and respond to the accessibility needs of parents and carers, including those with disability, and promote the wellbeing, inclusion, and participation of all family members, including siblings.
18. Invest in tailored peer support programs delivered in multiple formats (online, in-person, group, and 1:1), co-designed with lived experience and responsive to individual needs.
19. Provide long-term funding and infrastructure to support grassroots peer support groups, especially those serving priority cohorts.
20. Conduct a national audit of existing autism-related workforce capacity building initiatives, to identify scalable, neurodiversity-affirming models that can inform the *Thriving Kids* rollout.
21. Identify and prioritise the building of workforce capacity in rural and remote areas, and for priority cohorts currently experiencing a lack of service provision/thin markets.
22. Co-design a national workforce strategy for the Thriving Kids initiative to build sector capacity, deliver accredited training, track workforce growth, embed monitoring and evaluation, and ensure consistent, neurodiversity-affirming, evidence-informed practice across all settings.
23. Co-design inclusive pathways that recognise and harness the strengths, skills and expertise of people with disability and their families and carers, enabling them to enter, lead, and thrive within the Thriving Kids workforce.
24. Design and implement a nationally consistent, trauma-informed Transition Framework, with clear pathways, system coordination, and culturally safe, neurodiversity-affirming processes.
25. Fund trained navigators to help families access supports within and outside of Thriving Kids, with tailored, locally integrated guidance that continues through key transition points.
26. Fund and sustain tailored, co-designed and cohort led peer support programs as a core part of navigation and transitions supports.
27. Develop and implement a comprehensive outcomes framework for Thriving Kids that tracks meaningful short- and long-term outcomes, including across education, employment, mental health, and wellbeing, ensuring data is disaggregated by disability type and priority cohorts for equitable service delivery.

28. Align the Outcomes Framework with existing national strategies, including the National Autism Strategy, to promote consistency and integration across systems supporting children with disability and developmental delay.
29. Commit to sustained investment in research, data collection, and evaluation to drive continuous improvement, transparency, and accountability.

## 1. CO-DESIGN A THRIVING KIDS INITIATIVE THAT BUILDS TRUST AND LEAVES NO CHILD BEHIND.

**We welcome the Australian Government's commitment to invest \$2 billion in supports for Autistic children and children with developmental delay outside of the NDIS.** This investment forms an important part of the government's response to the NDIS Review, which identified significant gaps in the availability of supports for children with disability outside the Scheme. We agree that strengthening Foundational Supports is a vital step toward ensuring children with disability, including all Autistic children, can access the help they need, regardless of their NDIS eligibility.

**We look forward to working with governments to help co-design a system of Foundational Supports** that can meaningfully improve the experiences and outcomes of Autistic children and create a truly autism inclusive Australia. We are ready to provide any support we can to ensure the diverse experiences, perspectives and ideas of our community can help inform the design and implementation of this system and the Thriving Kids initiative.

**However, the distress and confusion across our community, following the Minister's announcement of Thriving Kids, must be acknowledged.** We are disappointed that the Terms of Reference to this inquiry do not touch on many of our community's concerns and that no further explanatory material, or importantly accessible information regarding the proposed initiative has been provided. We share many of our community's concerns and questions and ask that the Minister work with stakeholders to address them as soon as possible.

### **Outstanding questions and concerns include:**

- The extent to which the States and Territories are committed to and will invest in this initiative or Foundational Supports more broadly.
- The cohort of children Thriving Kids is intended to support and how access will be determined. As discussed below, autism is a permanent disability and "mild" and "moderate" are not diagnostic terms.
- The types of supports to be delivered under Thriving Kids and who they will be delivered by.
- How the government will ensure services, programs and resources are neurodiversity-affirming and evidence informed for Autistic children.
- The intended breakdown of general and targeted supports, and inclusion of navigation and peer support.
- Whether all Thriving Kids services and programs will be free for families, or a co-payment will apply.
- How much support or service provision eligible children will be able to access and whether they will be capped.
- How Thriving Kids will interact with the new NDIS children's pathway, currently under development.

**We also question the focus on Autistic children, as a major lever to reduce spending.**

Our recent analysis of the Supplement to Quarterly Report 2024-25 Q4, Supplement E National, Table E.112 and Quarterly dataset for Autism, Autism data to 30 June 2025, Tables 8 and 17 indicated that:

- **Autistic kids aged 0-8** constituted **23%** of NDIS participants in that age group and **7.2%** of total participants, but accounted for only **3.4%** of total support payments in the year ending 30 June 2025
- **Autistic kids aged 9-14** constituted **20%** of NDIS participants in that age group and **15.4%** of total participants, but accounted for only **7.4%** of total support payments in the year ending 30 June 2025.

Given the total payments listed on table E.112 exclude SIL participants, it is likely that the proportion of the budget spent on Autistic kids was even smaller, given SIL participants receive a large proportion of the budget.

**The announcement came at a trying time for our community** as it navigates the impacts of changes to NDIS supports, increases in re-assessments, the introduction of funding periods and impairment notices, and other upcoming NDIS reforms. Despite promises to engage with Autistic people and their families, carers and supporters on policy changes that impact them, our community felt unheard and excluded from policy discussions when the initiative was announced.

**In July – August 2025 (prior to the announcement of Thriving Kids) Amaze, in partnership with I CAN Network, Aspergers Victoria, Different Journeys and Yellow Ladybugs, conducted a community survey of NDIS experiences.** The survey provides a valuable lens into our community's current experiences and health, indicating that:

- **Foundational Supports are poorly understood by our community, even at an awareness level.** 54% of survey respondents reported that they have no understanding of Foundational Supports and 33% reported a little understanding.
- **Many Autistic NDIS participants are engaging in fewer services than prior to October 2024** (for reasons of plan reviews, changes to services they can access and/or uncertainties about NDIS supports). 38% of respondents reported engaging fewer services and of these respondents, only 26% reported that have they replaced some of these supports with non-NDIS supports (i.e. from government, community or non-profit sector organisations).
- **The wellbeing of our community is being seriously impacted.** The impacts of, and uncertainties relating to NDIS reforms are contributing to deteriorations in mental health (44% of respondents) and physical health (27%), increased isolation (38%), increased struggles at home, work and/or school (80%), and a reduced capacity to meet goals (48%).

**Going forward, people with disability and their families and carers must be at the centre, informing the design and implementation of Thriving Kids.** This will be essential to building trust and community ownership of this important initiative and the wider system of Foundational Supports. The importance of co-design, in accordance with commitments under

national and state disability frameworks, including the National Autism Strategy, is discussed in further detail below.

**It is crucial that no child falls between the gaps or is disadvantaged by the reform process.** No child should be denied access to the NDIS or removed from the scheme and referred to Foundational Supports/Thriving Kids until the new system is firmly in place, accessible and capable of meeting support needs.

**As demonstrated below, a considerable amount of work will be required** before a co-designed system of neuro-affirming, evidence informed and trusted Foundational Supports, supported by an adequate and skilled up workforce capable of meeting the needs of all eligible children, can be rolled out across Australia. The 1-to-2-year time frame identified by Minister Butler in his announcement of Thriving Kids will be wholly inadequate to deliver an effective and efficient system.

**Recommendations:**

1. Ensure the experiences and perspectives of people with disability and their families and carers, are at the centre and inform the future of Thriving Kids.
2. Ensure no child is denied access to the NDIS or removed from the scheme and referred to Foundational Supports until the new system is accessible and capable of meeting support needs.
3. Co-design a longer roll out timetable to deliver a neuro-affirming, evidence informed and trusted Foundational Supports system and Thriving Kids initiative.
4. Encourage the Australian and State and Territory governments to share more information about Thriving Kids, including State and Territory commitments and the cohort of children Thriving Kids will support.

## 2. LINK THRIVING KIDS WITH KEY POLICY FRAMEWORKS, INCLUDING THE NATIONAL AUTISM STRATEGY.

**As a first step, we recommend that all work on the Thriving Kids initiative be linked to and integrated with key national and state disability frameworks.** These include *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031*, *National Autism Strategy 2025 – 2031*, *National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People 2025 – 2035*, and State disability and autism plans and strategies, such as the *Victorian Autism Plan*, extended to 2027.

Linking these policy initiatives will be vital to ensure shared goals, consistent language and messaging, the avoidance of duplication, coordinated action across all levels of government and nationally consistency services (with adaptations for local context/priority cohorts as appropriate). It can also drive an integrated and aligned approach to service system reform, shared outcomes/accountabilities and seamless transitions for children as they out-grow Thriving Kids and/or move between different service systems.

### **A focus on the National Autism Strategy**

The National Autism Strategy's Oversight Council and Working Groups, together with the Strategy implementation team now sitting within the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing have undertaken considerable research, community engagement and work in co-design with the autism community. Learnings from this work, and the approach taken to co-designing the Strategy must help inform the design and implementation of Thriving Kids. The design and implementation of Thriving Kids should also clearly align with the following key elements of the National Autism Strategy.

### **Vision and Guiding Principles**

The Thriving Kids initiative should share the National Autism Strategy's vision for a safe and inclusive society where Autistic people are supported and empowered to thrive, in all aspects of life. It must also aim to address serious health inequities and improve autism-affirming care, in alignment with the National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic people.

The National Autism Strategy's Guiding Principles include "In partnership – nothing about us without us", accessibility based on universal design, self-determination and autonomy, aligned and accountable outcomes, acceptance and inclusivity, safety and rights, and neurodiversity-affirming, individualised and holistic.

The Strategy's Vision and Guiding Principles must guide the foundation for Thriving Kids to ensure it reflects Australia's commitments (including under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability), is co-designed with relevant stakeholders, embeds strengths-based, individualised and neurodiversity-affirming approaches, drives inclusion and is accountable via an aligned and meaningful outcome's framework.

### **Statement on Language**

This Strategy's Statement on Language must guide the language governments use to describe one or more of the cohorts of children that Thriving Kids may support. In particular, the Statement of Language includes:

*“The Strategy supports all Autistic people regardless of whether they are diagnosed, their specific diagnosis or how they identify. Terms such as ‘high functioning’, ‘low functioning’, ‘profound’, ‘severe’ and ‘mild’ autism may be used by some people to describe the challenges and barriers experienced by Autistic people and their families and carers. The Strategy does not use these terms and instead uses the term ‘all’ Autistic people. This recognises that every Autistic person has different strengths and faces different challenges and barriers, and these other terms can misrepresent the difficulties some Autistic people may experience and the capabilities of others”. (our emphasis added).*

Drawing on this guidance, the Australian Government’s use of the terms “mild” and “moderate” to describe the cohort of Autistic children that Thriving Kids is being designed to support must cease. These terms are not reflected in the diagnostic criteria for autism under the DSM-5, they do not reflect lived experiences of autism across our community and they misrepresent the capabilities and support needs of Autistic children. These terms should in no way form a basis for determining eligibility to the NDIS or Thriving Kids.

The NDIS Review strongly recommended that diagnosis no longer be used to determine NDIS access, with access instead determined by functional impairment and support needs. This approach, and the broader social model of disability, should be reflected when determining any cohort of children Thriving Kids may support.

### **Statement on Autism**

The Strategy’s Statement on Autism emphasises that:

- Autism is a permanent, lifelong disability.
- The experiences of Autistic people and their support needs can change over time, including during key transitions and in certain situations and environments.
- Supports need to be individualised and consider the whole person.
- Many Autistic people are multiply neurodivergent and have co-occurring neurotypes, disabilities and/or health conditions, many of which overlap in diagnostic criteria and can impact on experiences of daily life.

This understanding of autism must guide the design and implementation of Thriving Kids, ensuring clear recognition of autism as a permanent disability which presents differently across all Autistic people. Choice and control over flexible, individualised, whole of person supports must be delivered and the initiative must take into account co-occurring conditions and changes in support needs over time.

The Strategy’s statements on “**intersectionality**” and “**priority cohorts**” must be reflected in the design and implementation of Thriving Kids to ensure Autistic children experiencing intersectional, or other forms of disadvantage are prioritised, adequately supported (including via culturally safe supports) and are not left to fall between the cracks. This alignment is also essential to ensuring the experiences and perspectives of these cohorts helps inform the design and implementation of Thriving Kids.

There are several **commitments to improve service systems** outlined in the National Autism Strategy that could be directly relevant to or integrated with Thriving Kids, especially given their shared focus on early detection and intervention, and inclusion across settings. For

example, the Strategy includes commitments to improve screening and diagnostic tools, support families through the identification, assessment and diagnostic process, make autism assessment and diagnosis more affordable, improve access to quality, timely, neurodiversity-affirming and equitable services and supports for Autistic people, develop best practice training and resource materials for people providing supports and services to Autistic people, and a commitment to work with states and territories to improve the experience of Autistic people accessing disability supports outside the NDIS and mainstream services. Thriving Kids must be integrated with and aligned to actions (under the Strategy's actions plans) to deliver on these commitments.

**Recommendations:**

5. Link national and state disability and autism policy frameworks, including the National Autism Strategy, to the design and implementation of Thriving Kids, ensuring shared goals, guiding principles, language, commitments to equity, integrated and aligned approaches to service system reform, and aligned accountability and outcomes
6. Cease the use of outdated terms, such as “mild” and “moderate” autism to identify a cohort of children which may be supported by Thriving Kids.

### **3. CO-DESIGN AN INITIATIVE AND SERVICE SYSTEM WHERE ALL KIDS THRIVE.**

To ensure the Thriving Kids initiative delivers meaningful, sustainable, and equitable outcomes for eligible children with disability and developmental delay, it must be embedded within a trusted, integrated and inclusive service system. The design and implementation of the initiative must be guided by a clear framework that reflects best practices, embeds co-design, places children and their families at the centre and reflects wider disability commitments discussed above.

#### **A. CENTRE LIVED EXPERIENCE IN DESIGN AND DECISION MAKING THROUGH COMMITMENTS TO CODESIGN AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.**

We welcome the establishment of the Thriving Kids Advisory Group, led by the Hon. Mark Butler MP and Professor Frank Oberklaid. However, we are concerned by the limited lived experience represented across this group. To ensure the diverse experiences of Autistic children and their families/carers are informing Thriving Kids, it must include a diversity of Autistic people (including Autistic parents) and family members and carers.

A comprehensive co-design and community engagement framework is also needed to help guide an inclusive, accessible and collaborative process whereby all people with lived experience and other key stakeholders can share their experiences, perspectives and ideas, and shared decision-making power and responsibility is mutually understood and appropriately embedded.

The framework must ensure community engagement is accessible to all people with disability, including by providing multiple and flexible ways of engaging and adequate time for meaningful input. Accessible information to support understandings of the inquiry's Terms of Reference and the context of any engagement must also be supplied, including in Easy English.

We are concerned that accessible information about the Terms of Reference and the Thriving Kids initiative has not been provided to support this current community consultation. We are also concerned that flexible ways of engaging have not been provided (such as via online webinars and community engagement opportunities). The timeframe of just over 4 weeks to provide submissions or survey responses will prove prohibitively short for many, particularly considering school holidays and other consultations that are currently open and significant to people with disability and the disability sector (such as the Disability Discrimination Act review).

#### **Recommendations**

7. Develop and implement a National Community Engagement and Co-Design Framework to ensure all aspects of the Thriving Kids initiative are shaped through accessible, inclusive, and meaningful engagement with people with disability, families, carers, and other stakeholders
8. Ensure the Thriving Kids Advisory Group includes a diversity of members with lived experience, including Autistic people and their family members and carers.

## **B. APPLY AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS AND DELIVER EQUITABLE SUPPORTS.**

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Further to the discussion above, an intersectional and equity lens is essential to ensure historical barriers to support are recognised and Thriving Kids drives trauma informed, tailored, holistic and accessible services for children who face multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

As identified in the National Autism Strategy, intersectional disadvantage can be experienced by numerous cohorts of Autistic children, young people and adults. With a focus on Autistic children under 9, these cohorts include:

- First Nations Autistic children
- Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Autistic children
- Autistic girls and gender diverse children
- Autistic children with very high support needs
- Autistic children with co-occurring disabilities or health conditions
- Autistic children in regional, rural, and remote areas
- Autistic children in the child protection system
- Autistic children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage

It is essential that any Autistic children accessing Thriving Kids are provided holistic supports that relate not only to their autism, but also to any co-occurring disabilities. The National Autism Strategy recognises that commonly co-occurring disabilities include, but are not limited to ADHD, OCD, intellectual disability, depression, anxiety and some medical conditions.

As also recognised by the National Autism Strategy, more data and research is needed to properly understand the multiple and overlapping needs of these intersectional cohorts. In designing and delivering Thriving Kids, extensive work must be undertaken with these communities to understand their needs, design and test tailored service solutions, ensure service accessibility and eliminate systemic inequities.

### **Recommendation**

9. Apply a robust intersectional and equity lens, reflecting commitments and priority cohorts identified in the National Autism Strategy.

## **C. CODESIGN A FRAMEWORK FOR NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING, EVIDENCE INFORMED SERVICE DELIVERY, SHAPED BY LIVED EXPERIENCE.**

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**In October 2024, the Australian Government conducted two large community consultations to help shape Foundational Supports** – a consultation on General Supports and another on Foundational Supports for children (under 7) with developmental delay or disability and their families, carers and kin. These consultations framed Foundational Supports as General Supports (such as information, support and referral services and capacity building initiatives and resources) and Targeted Supports (including 1:1 and other supports for children that need more assistance than mainstream services and General Foundational Supports can provide). It is unclear whether Thriving Kids is being designed around the same concepts of

General and Targeted supports. For the purposes of this submission, we are assuming that it is.

The Australian Government received hundreds of submissions and heard directly from a broad cross-section of people with lived experience, service providers, and sector experts through online consultations.

**We urge you to access these submissions and contributions, and draw on the Department of Social Services “What we heard” [summaries](#) to help inform your model for Thriving Kids.** Consistent with our [submissions](#), there was a ground swell of advocacy for more accessible and inclusive community based supports and early learning environments, co-designed and culturally safe approaches tailored to the needs of priority cohorts, neurodiversity-affirming general supports delivered by trusted organisations and informed by lived experience, robust navigation and information systems (including peer support), integrated support for families and carers and sustainable funding and coordination across service systems.

We understand that the Thriving Kids initiative will focus on identifying developmental concerns earlier and establishing a national system of supports for eligible children and their families. To be successful, it must drive equitable identification and access to assessment and diagnosis, deliver neurodiversity-affirming, accessible, inclusive and evidence informed Targeted Supports across settings, and empower children and families through trusted, inclusive, and culturally safe general supports, including cohort specific information services and resources.

#### ***I. [DRIVE EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND ACCESS TO ASSESSMENT AND DIAGNOSIS.](#)***

To ensure developmental differences are identified early, regardless of location or financial means, nationally consistent early identification and screening practices must be embedded across universal and public early intervention services. Early assessment and diagnosis is crucial to ensure Autistic children can access evidence informed, impactful early interventions for Autistic children.

**Victoria offers valuable insights for capacity building. For example, Maternal and Child Health nurses are trained in the [Social Attention and Communication Surveillance \(SACS\) tool](#), developed by the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, which has [proven highly effective](#) in identifying children with a high likelihood of autism or developmental delay.** This is accompanied by the monitoring of the SACS tool which provides online and face to face training to enhance the capacity of nurses to identify early indications of autism. Similarly, **Mindful’s [Autism Training Program](#) equips mental health clinicians** across public and private sectors to better identify and understand autism and its co-occurrence with mental health conditions.

As discussed above, work to improve early identification and screening, and access to assessment and diagnosis should be integrated with the work and commitments already being progressed under the **National Autism Strategy** and other national and state disability and autism strategies and plans. For example, in Victoria, the refreshed **Victorian Autism Plan** includes commitments to expand access to public autism assessments, including by investing

in public assessments via early childhood services and hubs, and by funding public autism assessments in adult mental health services in partnership with Mindful.

## **II. TARGETED SUPPORTS: DELIVER CHOICE AND CONTROL OVER NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING AND EVIDENCE INFORMED SERVICES AND SUPPORTS**

**Thriving Kids Targeted Supports should be demand-based, ensuring that every child who meets eligibility criteria can access appropriate support, with a guaranteed minimum level of service.** To ensure these services are accessible for all, costs must not be shifted to parents and carers, with requirements of co-payments for services. This would further entrench disadvantage with many families across priority cohorts unable to afford services.

**Targeted supports must be delivered in both group and one-on-one settings, in ways that are inclusive, trauma-informed, evidence informed, meet individual needs and are neurodiversity affirming.** They must be embedded across all environments where children engage—including early learning and school settings—and reflect the soon to be released Early Childhood Intervention Best Practice Framework. We expect that this Framework will drive a shift to best practice Early Childhood Intervention, featuring key workers, transdisciplinary approaches, family and community centred approaches and supports embedded in everyday environments. Opportunities to leverage related reforms in Early Childhood Education Settings and schools should be explored.

**Successful existing services provide strong foundations that may be scaled nationally,** with adaptations to local needs and the needs of priority cohorts. Examples of well-regarded services in Victoria include **Play Connect** play groups for children (aged 0 – 6) with disability or developmental delay, **Early Days Workshops** for parents, carers and family members of Autistic children (aged 0 – 6), **MyTime** groups for parents and carers of children with disability and developmental delay (aged 0 – 18), **I CAN's** Autistic led peer mentoring program delivered across Victorian schools, together with other initiatives under Victoria's Autism Plan and Autism Education Strategy. For insight into other services across Victoria that are supporting Autistic children, please see the [Victorian Autism Plan Progress Report](#) (published September 2025).

**To ensure the relevance and quality of any services and programs to be delivered under Thriving Kids, a comprehensive assessment, including an ethics assessment should be required. The assessment should identify** whether services and programs are neurodiversity affirming, trauma informed, inclusive, evidence informed and are led or have been informed by lived experience. It should also assess the extent to which short- and long-term outcomes have been measured (including for priority cohorts). Work being undertaken under the National Autism Strategy's First Action Plan to identify and understand neurodiversity affirming service provision and capacity building should be connected into the development of this assessment.

**New and existing programs identified for rollout should be piloted,** including in rural and remote areas and for priority cohorts and independently evaluated before national roll out, with Thriving Kids timeframes that allow for iterative development, evaluation and refinement.

**Mechanisms must be in place to ensure that, to the extent possible, families retain choice and control** over any targeted or individualised services they receive and the settings in which they are delivered, recognising that one size does not fit all.

**III. GENERAL SUPPORTS: EMPOWER CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THROUGH TRUSTED, INCLUSIVE, AND CULTURALLY SAFE INFORMATION SERVICES AND RESOURCES.**

**In addition to Targeted Supports, the Thriving Kids initiative must invest in high-quality, accessible general supports**, including information, support and referral (ISR) services, and information resources tailored to the needs of Autistic children and their families and carers (tailored to the needs of priority cohorts). These must be co-designed, neurodiversity affirming, culturally respectful, and made available across multiple access points and formats.

**A well regarded, general national ISR service for children is the Raising Children’s Network**, a popular website housing quality, evidence (including lived experience) informed information in a range of formats (including written and video information). While the Disability and Carer Gateways also house information and resources, they are not targeted at children, and Autistic people and their families have reported mixed experiences with these platforms.

**Tailored services and resources co-designed by, and capable of meeting the needs of priority cohorts are essential.** Existing well regarded models include the [First Peoples Disability Network](#) and the [National Ethnic Disability Alliance](#).

**Trusted autism-specific services are essential to complement general supports** and ensure people receive accurate, evidence-informed information. A strong example is Autism Connect, delivered by Amaze.

**Autism Connect is a free, national helpline funded by the Australian Government.** It offers independent advice via phone, email, and webchat, staffed by professionals—many with lived experience. Advisors support Autistic people, families, and carers to navigate topics such as diagnosis, education, communication strategies, the NDIS, and inclusive workplaces. They also provide referrals to peer support groups and connect users with neuro-affirming resources through the Autism Connect search engine.

**In 2024–25, Autism Connect supported 710 families of children aged 0–6.** The top five topics raised were diagnosis, education, family and community supports, understanding autism, and accessing therapy.

**Evaluations show the service builds trust and empowers families.** 89% of contacts that provided feedback in the 2024-25 Financial Year reported that they found the information relevant, 90% reported that they would recommend Amaze, 73% stated that they took action within a month and 83% reported feeling reassured by Advisors. Many users value speaking with someone who shares lived experience. Qualitative feedback highlights the empathy, understanding, and practical support provided, with families reporting increased confidence and a sense of being heard

**We strongly recommend that the Australian Government codesign of a national framework of ISR services and information resources to be delivered by a network of trusted organisations under the Thriving Kids initiative.** It must be co-designed with

stakeholders, including a diversity of people with lived experience, and guarantee that no children or families fall between the cracks. It must ensure:

- an appropriate balance of general and targeted supports is delivered.
- general supports are delivered via a network of well-connected, trusted and aligned disability organisations, ensuring families and carers can receive quick, trusted, neurodiversity affirming and strengths based support throughout their journey.
- services are inclusive, accessible, well connected, culturally safe and embedded within local contexts, and tailored to the needs of priority cohorts.
- trusted autism specific services and resources compliment and help build the accessibility and inclusion of more general services and resources.
- services and resources are shaped by people with lived experience, with children and families at the centre.
- sustainable promotion of services and resources, including via a commitment to ongoing communication strategies.
- robust and reliable measures for service evaluation, accountability and transparency are embedded.

**To inform this Framework, and General Supports to be delivered under the Thriving Kids initiative, a comprehensive assessment, including an ethics assessment of existing services and resources (as per our suggestion above, regarding Targeted supports) should be undertaken.**

**Finally, funding models under the initiative must extend beyond short-term project delivery.** Long-term investment is needed to ensure the sustainability of services and resources, with funding allocated for ongoing evaluation, maintenance, and regular updates to resources as new evidence and policy changes emerge. The success of Thriving Kids will depend on a connected, inclusive and well-supported ecosystem that is grounded in community, informed by evidence, and driven by the diverse experiences and perspectives of Autistic people and their families.

### **Recommendations**

10. Co-design and fund a national framework of General Supports to be delivered by a network of trusted organisations under the Thriving Kids initiative, including cohort specific supports and supports tailored to the needs of priority cohorts.
11. Embed early identification and screening processes across universal and public early intervention services and improve access to autism diagnosis.
12. Undertake an independent assessment, including an ethics assessment of all existing and proposed services and resources that may be scaled under *Thriving Kids*, ensuring they are neurodiversity affirming, trauma-informed, culturally inclusive, grounded in evidence and lived experience, and embed measures of success.
13. Fund guaranteed, demand-driven access to Targeted Supports for all eligible children under the initiative, with no co-payments or cost-shifting to families.

14. Ensure children and families retain choice and control over the Targeted Services they receive and the settings in which they are delivered.
15. Pilot Thriving Kids services and supports, including in rural and remote areas and for priority cohorts, prior to full roll out.

#### **D. DELIVER INCLUSIVE, ACCESSIBLE GENERAL SUPPORTS FOR ALL CHILDREN WITH DISABILITY AND DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY, AND THEIR FAMILIES AND CARERS.**

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The NDIS Review recommended a system of Foundational Supports capable of meeting the needs of all people with disability, including people that are and are not NDIS participants. Accordingly, **any general services and supports developed under the Thriving Kids initiative should be accessible and tailored to the needs of all children with disability and their family members and carers.** This includes children with high communication and behaviour support needs.

**The wellbeing and inclusion of families, including siblings must be supported via the initiative,** recognising that a child's development and long-term outcomes are deeply influenced by the health, resilience, and connectedness of their whole family. The [2022 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers](#) and [2024 National Carer Survey](#) confirm that parents, families, carers and kin of people with disability experience disproportionate levels of isolation and poor mental health, and are more likely to be unemployed or experience under-employment. Foundational Supports should wholistically support this cohort to live meaningful lives, including through social connection, employment and equal access to all aspects of their community. The value of peer support is discussed below.

**The accessibility and inclusion needs of parents and families must be prioritised** in the design and implementation of Thriving Kids. Many parents of children with disability have one more disabilities themselves and may require tailored support to participate in programs alongside their children, attend support group meetings, and navigate complex systems. Further detail on the importance of system navigation is provided below.

#### **Recommendation**

16. Ensure general Thriving Kids services are inclusive of all children with disability, regardless of NDIS eligibility, diagnosis and support needs.
17. Design Thriving Kids to recognise and respond to the accessibility needs of parents and carers, including those with disability, and promote the wellbeing, inclusion, and participation of all family members, including siblings.

#### **E. EMBED PEER SUPPORT ACROSS THE THRIVING KIDS INITIATIVE**

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Further to the recommendation above, that peer support be included as a critical element of transition support, **peer support should also be embedded across the Thriving Kids initiative to positively support social skills, well-being, self-advocacy and connection outcomes for children and families.**

**There is continually emerging evidence that peer support increases well-being and quality of life, and can provide emotional support and enhance empowerment and resilience. Evaluations of the Autistic-led peer support and mentoring being delivered by I CAN, across more than 100 government schools, have demonstrated that they are having a positive impact by improving social and communication skills, building connections and a sense of belonging, and building self-confidence and self-acceptance.**

**An effective, existing model for parents of Autistic children is Autism Peer Assist, delivered by Amaze.** Autism Peer Assist is a free one-on-one peer support program for parents and carers of Autistic people, especially those facing complex challenges such as social disadvantage, housing insecurity and single parenting. Mentors with lived experience support participants over up to 10 sessions, covering topics like autism understanding, NDIS navigation, education, therapies, and carer supports.

In FY24–25, feedback from participants showed that 100% of responders felt more confident to advocate for themselves and the Autistic person they support, were satisfied with the program and would recommend it to others. 92% strongly agreed they were satisfied with the support received. Participants consistently reported feeling more informed, empowered, and connected to their communities.

Amaze also supports peer support group leaders across Victoria to build and sustain inclusive, tailored peer support networks.

**Our learnings from delivering our peer support services include** that peer support must be co-designed and tailored to individual needs, provided via multiple modes, (including in-person, online, group and 1:1) and it must be well promoted. We also understand that individuals and grass roots organisations need greater support to run peer support groups, with long-term investment needed in peer support groups that can meet the needs of priority cohorts.

### **Recommendations**

18. Invest in tailored peer support programs delivered in multiple formats (online, in-person, group, and 1:1), co-designed with lived experience and responsive to individual needs.
19. Provide long-term funding and infrastructure to support grassroots peer support groups, especially those serving priority cohorts.

## **F. CODESIGN A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY TO ADDRESS WORKFORCE SHORTAGES AND CAPACITY BUILDING NEEDS.**

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**At this stage we have limited information about the Thriving Kids initiative**, including who will deliver it, the nature of supports and how it will be funded. It is therefore difficult to specify some of the gaps in workforce support and the training required.

**However, we do know that there is considerable variability across sectors in autism-related capacity and capability**, including across education, health, and community services. This inconsistency often leads to fragmented and inequitable support for Autistic children and

their families and carers, with access to appropriate services and supports depending heavily on location, workforce training, and sector-specific priorities.

**An assessment, including an ethics assessment of any existing capacity building initiatives to be delivered under Thriving Kids should be required.** As per our recommendations above, the assessment should identify whether these initiatives are neurodiversity affirming, trauma informed, inclusive, evidence informed, led or informed by lived experience and evaluated against short- and long-term outcomes (including for priority cohorts). Highly regarded models, informed by evidence and lived experience to build sector capacity include the MCH/OTARC and Mindful initiatives discussed above. In education, Victoria's [Diverse Learners Hub](#) offers a promising model for building system-wide capacity by providing targeted professional learning, resources, and cross-sector collaboration to better support neurodiverse students.

**It is well known that thin markets currently exist, particularly across many rural and regional areas.** Data should be accessed and made publicly available on the areas experiencing the greatest lack of service provision to help inform strategic priorities. Further investigation should also be undertaken into the extent to which culturally safe services are provided across rural and remote areas.

**A comprehensive workforce strategy or plan, co-designed with relevant stakeholders, including people with lived experience will be needed.** It should include:

- the creation of **capacity building frameworks for relevant sectors**, requiring neurodiversity affirming and evidence informed approaches, designed and delivered by people with lived experience and a trusted network of disability sector organisations.
- **a training accreditation program** to deliver high-quality, consistent, cross-sector and sustainable training outcomes, and strengthen community trust.
- **a skills register to track and support workforce growth.** These tools would ensure consistent, high-quality practice across service settings, and drive alignment with evidence-informed, neurodiversity-affirming approaches.
- **Investment in professional capacity building and** incentives to join the Thriving Kids workforce, particularly in rural and remote areas and to meet the needs of priority cohorts.
- **robust and reliable measures for evaluation**, with accountability and transparency embedded.

**The Strategy will need to drive long-term investment** in capacity-building initiatives that span service sectors and community organisations, and it must be sustainable, scalable, and responsive to emerging needs.

**Importantly, this work must be co-designed with people with lived experience and create pathways to harness their often-underutilised skills, interests, and expertise, supporting them to enter, lead, and thrive in the workforce.** Training programs should be developed and delivered in collaboration with Autistic people and sector leaders, ensuring that the content reflects lived realities and best-practice support models. By embedding co-design at every stage—from workforce planning and recruitment to training and ongoing professional

development—the Thriving Kids initiative can not only deliver high-quality, inclusive supports, but also model the kind of systemic change needed to create a truly inclusive and capable sector.

### Recommendations

20. Conduct a national audit of existing autism-related workforce capacity building initiatives, to identify scalable, neurodiversity-affirming models that can inform the *Thriving Kids* rollout.
21. Identify and prioritise the building of workforce capacity in rural and remote areas, and for priority cohorts currently experiencing a lack of service provision/thin markets.
22. Co-design a national workforce strategy for the Thriving Kids initiative to build sector capacity, deliver accredited training, track workforce growth, embed monitoring and evaluation, and ensure consistent, neurodiversity-affirming, evidence-informed practice across all settings.
23. Co-design inclusive pathways that recognise and harness their strengths, skills and expertise of people with disability and their families and carers, enabling them to enter, lead, and thrive within the Thriving Kids workforce.

## G. IDENTIFY MECHANISMS FOR A SEAMLESS TRANSITION THROUGH RELEVANT SERVICES AND SUPPORTS.

Delivering consistent, inclusive, and long-term outcomes for children under the Thriving Kids initiative will require scaffolding and support with seamless transitions across services, supports, and life stages.

**Key transition points for children under nine, and their families and carers** include starting early education, moving into school, and navigating changes between grades, classrooms, or schools etc. Children and their families and carers may also require support during transitions between service systems, developmental points (including diagnosis and during burnout or behavioural escalation) and through times of crisis and challenging life events, such as parent separation, fleeing family violence and relocation.

**Although Thriving Kids focuses on the early years, the needs of children and their families extend well beyond age eight.** Without clear and supported pathways into Foundational Supports, the NDIS, and mainstream services, families risk falling through the cracks, especially during critical developmental or life stages. Navigating multiple, often siloed systems without guidance can lead to stress, disengagement, and missed opportunities for inclusion, wellbeing, and early intervention.

**To address this, mechanisms must be established to support families before, during, and after transitions. This includes funding dedicated navigators** who can help families understand their options, make informed choices, and connect with appropriate supports across early childhood, education, community, and disability systems. Navigation must also be responsive to the intersecting needs of families facing additional barriers due to geography, culture, language, disability, or socioeconomic disadvantage. A nationally coordinated

mapping of services and pathways, alongside resourcing for local organisations, will be essential to guide families within their communities.

**Peer support must be embedded as a core component of transition support.** Programs such as **Autism Peer Assist** have shown that peer-led mentoring can empower families to navigate systems, advocate effectively, and reduce social isolation. Importantly, peer support should not be viewed as a substitute for professional navigation services, but as an essential complement—especially during high-pressure periods like diagnosis, service access, school transitions and crisis periods. Long-term investment in cohort-led peer support is vital to ensure continuity and connection through difficult transitions.

**A well-designed, non-siloed Transition Framework**, grounded in trauma-informed, neurodiversity-affirming, and culturally safe principles, should be co-designed with people with lived experience, including Autistic people and their families and carers. This framework should include clear referral processes, coordinated service systems, and sustainable support mechanisms that follow families throughout their journey—not just at entry points.

### Recommendations

24. Design and implement a nationally consistent, trauma-informed Transition Framework, with clear pathways, system coordination, and culturally safe, neurodiversity-affirming processes.
25. Fund trained navigators to help families access supports within and outside of Thriving Kids, with tailored, locally integrated guidance that continues through key transition points.
26. Fund and sustain tailored, co-designed and cohort led peer support programs as a core part of navigation and transitions supports.

## H. MEASURE SUCCESS, WITH A COMMITMENT TO DATA COLLECTION AND OUTCOMES REPORTING.

**Measuring the success of the Thriving Kids initiative is crucial to ensuring it delivers meaningful, lasting benefits for children with disability and their families and carers.** Historically, community services have commonly lacked comprehensive outcomes frameworks and reliable data collection mechanisms, which has made it difficult to assess their impact or guide future improvements. Without a clear commitment to measurement, initiatives risk falling short of their goals or failing to respond effectively to the evolving needs of the communities they serve, particularly priority cohorts.

**To address this gap, Thriving Kids must be anchored by a comprehensive Outcomes Framework that prioritizes robust and reliable data collection.** This framework should track progress towards meaningful short- and long-term outcomes such as education, employment, mental health, and overall wellbeing. This data must be broken down by disability type, including autism, and priority cohorts to ensure equity in service delivery and outcomes for all eligible children.

**Importantly, the Outcomes Framework should align with and build upon existing frameworks** from the National Autism Strategy, Australia’s Disability Strategy, and the

upcoming Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) Best Practice Framework, while also connecting to related strategies like the Early Years Strategy, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Strategy, the National Carers Strategy, the NDIS, and the Supporting Autistic Children Guideline. This interconnected approach will promote consistency and measurements of success across multiple systems.

**Thriving Kids must commit to ongoing investment in research and data collection** to drive continuous learning and improvement. The ability to gather and analyze high-quality data will enable stakeholders to identify what works, where gaps remain, and how services can be better tailored to meet the diverse needs of children and families.

**Embedding a strong culture of evaluation and transparency will build trust with the community and service providers.** It will ensure that Thriving Kids remains accountable to the families it serves and responsive to emerging challenges, while also identifying areas for improvement and guiding future reforms.

### **Recommendations**

27. Develop and implement a comprehensive outcomes framework for Thriving Kids that tracks meaningful short- and long-term outcomes, including across education, employment, mental health, and wellbeing, ensuring data is disaggregated by disability type and priority cohorts for equitable service delivery.
28. Align the Outcomes Framework with existing national strategies, including the National Autism Strategy, to promote consistency and integration across systems supporting children with disability and developmental delay.
29. Commit to sustained investment in research, data collection, and evaluation to drive continuous improvement, transparency, and accountability.