

Foundational Supports – General Supports national consultation

**Goodstart Early Learning submission
December 2024**

About Goodstart

We are for children, not profit

Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest provider of early childhood education and care, with over 650 centres located across every state and territory, supporting around 61,000 children from over 51,000 families with a team of over 16,000 employees. As a not-for-profit social enterprise, our purpose is to ensure all of Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

Submission

Goodstart welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the national consultation on Foundational Supports, an important recommendation arising from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review. We understand this national consultation process is focused on the 'general supports' stream, which encompasses information, advice and capacity building for people with disability, families, carers and kin, and community organisations. 'Targeted supports', being supports that operate between inclusive mainstream services (for example early childhood education and care (ECEC), schools, and community mental health) and the specialist supports accessed through the NDIS, will be the subject of a second, upcoming consultation process in 2025. We look forward to engaging in that process in detail.

Goodstart supports all children to access ECEC

At Goodstart, we've made deliberate investments to ensure we can support all children – including those with disability, developmental delay and diagnosed conditions – to access early learning. Because of these investments, we have a significant population of children and families with additional needs or disability, who will be impacted by Foundational Supports. This year, 4,578 or 7.5% of Goodstart children had an additional need or disability and every centre in our network supported at least one child with a diagnosed disability or additional support need. We are proud to have a world class data set that helps us understand the level of need across our centres and supports us to direct our social purpose investment to where we know we can make a difference to children's outcomes. This data set for example tells us:

- The main four additional needs consistent across our centres and across all states are speech/language delay, developmental delay, autism spectrum disorder, and requires behavioural support.
- Around half of all children with additional needs are in the first two categories - speech/language delay and developmental delay.
- 43% of children with additional needs or disability have at least one other risk factor - most commonly these children are also from low-income households or are also children at risk of abuse or neglect.
- Children with a disability attend on average 3.35 days per week, at similar rates to all children at Goodstart (3.33 days per week).

As the largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest provider of ECEC, with services in every state and territory across the country, our size and reach mean we have a unique insight into the broader disability service system. We work closely with:

- Early Childhood Partners in each state and territory including Each, Northcott, Mission Australia and Uniting (NSW); Brotherhood of St Laurence (Vic); Benevolent Society, Mission Australia and Bushkids (Queensland); Kudos (SA); and Wanslea (WA), and

- Inclusion Agencies across the country, including KU Children’s Services (NSW/ACT and Qld) as well as the Inclusion Development Fund Manager; Early Childhood Australia (NT); Gowrie SA (SA); Community Child Care (Vic); Lady Gowrie (Tas); and Communicare (WA).

We also deliver NDIS services through our network of allied health professionals. Our delivery model includes a team of Goodstart employees and some contractors. We provide this support in centres whilst children attend their early learning program, with the aim to build a child’s capacity to benefit from their participation in early learning and better support our educators to provide an inclusive and enriching environment for all children. Goodstart also provides support for a child’s transition to school to ensure the child and family receive continuity of learning and care as they move into a new learning environment. As at November 2024, 42 centres provided essential Allied Health services for 108 children in their centres, providing Speech Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Social Work, and Psychology with costs partially met by NDIS funded plans with Goodstart’s targeted social purpose investment covering the gaps.

This investment and service offering is accompanied by a universal support system to access inclusion supports and allied health professionals, primarily through our nationally coordinated Practice and Inclusion Helpdesk. This Helpdesk is available to every centre-based employee to seek inclusion support for individual children or small groups of children. Helpdesk assistance is available via email, phone or online (chat and video) and depending on the presenting need may be triaged for in-centre visits, observation, monitoring and more intensive support as required.

Together, our national reach, social purpose, existing investments in inclusion and additional supports, and close cross-sector relationships mean we are well positioned to be a part of the development of Foundational Supports and their implementation in ECEC settings.

Provision of general supports through ECEC

Many ECEC services already play an important role in providing information and support to families with children with additional needs and connecting them to the supports they need. In fact, ECEC services are often one of the first points of call – an internal survey found around a quarter of Goodstart families (26 per cent) found out about Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) from their educator, second only to their doctor (47 per cent).¹ Further, 81 per cent of families said their service provider or therapist was working with their Goodstart centre to some extent to support their child. When this occurs, families noted there are significant benefits, including feeling confident that everyone who cares for their child has the same information (71 per cent) and is working towards the same goals for their child (69 per cent).

At Goodstart we have information available in every centre across the country to assist them in making referrals to local services should children be identified with an additional need or with a possible disability or developmental delay. Family facing information is also available via our centre teams, to assist families in better understanding the supports that may be available to them in their local community, as well as how to access those supports, either at Goodstart or through other local services. This information is translated into the main five languages other than English (Mandarin, Hindi, Vietnamese, Punjabi and Arabic) that are spoken by Goodstart families, to ensure accessibility. Further, Goodstart offers professional learning to all educators working with children with additional needs to build their skills in holding sensitive conversations with families as well as how to make referrals to local providers. Goodstart has also made significant investments to provide support and services to support the enrolment and participation of children with disability or diagnosed conditions. While the scale and breadth of support provided at Goodstart is beyond what most ECEC providers can offer, the recent SA Royal Commission identified that up to 82 per cent of

¹ Goodstart ECEI Family Survey (February 2021) – 1,642 families surveyed with a response rate of 14.7% (margin of error <6%)

ECEC providers go beyond their core business with activities spanning health, development and community connections either on site or in the local community to ensure children and families have access to a broad range of supports.

It is important that the design of 'general supports' considers and supports ECEC to continue to be an environment in which these supports are delivered. This could include greater investment in the ECEC sector to build the capacity of every service to provide the right information and connection to relevant services for families and children where additional needs due to developmental delay or disability are identified. This could also include funding for ECEC providers, to ensure the time that is required to be able to provide better access to services in each local community is considered as fundamental to all ECEC provision and not just an 'add on'.

As a high-quality, inclusive provider of ECEC, we are also deeply interested in 'targeted supports' and the future role for ECEC to play in their delivery. As mentioned above, we already provide allied health services under the NDIS for children with additional needs in many of our centres, and also provide allied health supports for children who are not eligible for the NDIS. We see many opportunities to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of delivering these kind of 'targeted supports' within ECEC environments, not just to children with NDIS plans as per the intent of 'targeted supports', and look forward to providing a more detailed submission to the upcoming consultation process focused on these supports. With our unique national footprint and national dataset, dedicated team of inclusion professionals and deep expertise in operational and systemic policy design and implementation, we look forward to bringing these skills to support the next phase of consultation.

It's important to note that the concept of inclusion in ECEC is broader than just children with developmental delays and disability

For Goodstart, the most deeply ambitious reform idea is that we might build a system where all children can access early learning, regardless of what their inclusion needs might be, and that learning delivers the quality experience that will turbocharge their educational and life outcomes. In the ECEC context, inclusion as defined by the Early Years Learning Framework is wider than children with developmental delay and disability – inclusion in ECEC means practices that support all children, including:

- First Nations children and families,
- children and families from different cultural backgrounds,
- children in families with low-socio-economic backgrounds, including jobless families,
- children who have experienced trauma, and
- children requiring additional support to participate in ECEC for any other reason.

We can proudly say that 86 per cent of Goodstart centres (560 centres) have at least 20 children enrolled who have identified risk factors. At some centres this is even higher, with 37% of our network (237 services) supporting more than 40 children with risk factors in their centre and 10% of our network supporting more than 60 children with risk factors in their centre. This compares very favourably with the rest of the ECEC sector and community.

The need for improved inclusion and accessibility of mainstream services was an important theme arising from the NDIS review. We know that there is much work to do to ensure inclusion in ECEC is an integrated part of the mainstream service offering, and not an optional add on that is currently delivered with varying quality and capability across the sector. Goodstart is proud to already make significant investments to achieve inclusion – well beyond available Government funding. At an enterprise level, Goodstart's investments include: professional development to build the capability of our team members, so they can

effectively include children and families likely to be vulnerable (\$19 million in 2022, 40 per cent of targeted social purpose investment); developing and implementing programs that facilitate enrolment, access and participation by these children and families (\$9.6 million in 2022, 20 per cent of targeted social purpose investment); and investing to meet funding 'gaps' where government programs do not fully meet the costs of inclusion (\$5.6 million in 2022, 12 per cent of targeted social purpose investment). We also make specific investments in supporting Reconciliation to improve cultural safety and responsiveness, which have been the foundation for our above-average participation by First Nations children and families (\$1.2 million in 2022, 2.5 per cent of targeted social purpose investment).

Achieving a truly inclusive mainstream ECEC system requires significant, multi-level investment from Government at the child, service and community level – focused on the broad definition of inclusion. Goodstart estimates the required level of funding to be over \$1.1 billion per year – covering the shortfalls in the current Inclusion Support Program and establishing a needs-based inclusion fund in line with recommendations from the Productivity Commission's recent inquiry into the future of ECEC. Foundational Supports consultations are taking place against a backdrop of significant reform in the ECEC sector, including in the inclusion space, and it is vital that the design of supports in both processes do not occur in silos.

Goodstart sees ECEC inclusion and Foundational Supports as critical and connected components of the early years ecosystem that wraps around children and supports them to thrive. We know that ECEC plays a key role in supporting families with children who require additional support, as well being an effective environment in which to deliver those supports. Evidence suggests interventions delivered in a child's 'natural environment' (such as their early learning classroom) can be more effective for children under 5 years of age than traditional 'clinical' based interventions. This is because children can practice their skills in real time with peers and/or family in meaningful, enjoyable experiences (such as play experiences with friends and educators, mealtimes and other important daily routines). However, this integration has to happen in a way that is planned, purposeful and mindful of the core business of ECEC services. For example, large numbers of visitors to ECEC services per week to deliver Foundational Supports could result in extreme disruption to the early learning environment and have negative impacts on children's learning. Further, this integration needs to consider how we can ensure there is an adequately sized, qualified and supported workforce to deliver Foundational Supports.

While connected, it is also important that the design of and investment in ECEC inclusion and Foundational Supports are not conflated. Adequate investment in ECEC inclusion is necessary in its own right to embed inclusive practices and capability into the mainstream service offering. This will create the solid universal educational base required for Foundational Supports to build on and provide the extra level of support required for some children with developmental delays or disability.

We welcome the opportunity to continue engaging on the design of Foundational Supports, particularly on how 'targeted supports' can be implemented and integrated into ECEC settings. We would also welcome the opportunity to provide a tour of one of our services to see our supports in action.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS ANY PART OF THIS SUBMISSION IN FURTHER DETAIL, PLEASE CONTACT:

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