



Ethnic Community Services Co-operative

A voice for diversity and inclusion

(Formerly known as Ethnic Child Care, Family and Community Services Co-operative)

Feedback on the new Early Childhood Approach

Ethnic Community Services Co-operative (ECSC) thanks the National Disability Insurance Agency for the opportunity to provide feedback on changes to the way young children and their families are supported by the NDIS. ECSC is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that provides culturally responsive supports and advocacy for people from CALD backgrounds, with a focus on vulnerable populations including young children and people with disability. For over 38 years, we have played a lead role in enabling the inclusion of CALD children and families in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in NSW through our Bicultural Support program, which facilitates communication between CALD children, families and educators; builds the cultural knowledge and competence of educators; and supports the maintenance of children's home languages. We are also a registered provider of NDIS supports and work with government and service providers to promote the rights of CALD people with disability. This brief submission draws on our direct experience working with CALD children and people with disability and their families, to highlight some of the needs of this cohort which should be reflected in the new approach.

Community outreach and education

ECSC agrees that many families and young children that are experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability are not receiving support early enough. Children and families from CALD backgrounds are particularly likely to miss out on early access to the right support, due to the complex interaction of barriers such as language barriers, differences in cultural perspectives on disability, and a lack of knowledge about the disability services system in Australia. In our experience, the most effective way to address these barriers is through community outreach and education at the grassroots level. This outreach can raise awareness of the issues and available supports, in ways that are trusted by local communities.

For example, our National Community Connectors Program team has consistently found that our model of face-to-face engagement with CALD people with disability and their families in natural settings has been highly successful in facilitating access to the NDIS and other services. Building relationships with community leaders who can act as champions within their communities for accessing appropriate disability support, has led to many families having the confidence to request support for the first time. Similarly, our Bicultural Workers supporting inclusion of CALD children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, have often played a key role in identifying children who may require additional support. Building on their relationship of trust with the family and utilising their cultural understanding and language skills, our Bicultural Workers can introduce families to the supports available to them, in a way which is understood and feels safe.

Recommendation 1: We recommend that the new Early Childhood Approach prioritises community outreach and engagement in partnership with grassroots community organisations.

Building family capacity

A next step after community outreach is building the capacity of families to access and manage supports. We believe that the key way to improve access to best practice, high quality support is



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building the capacity of families to understand what good support looks like, and how to exercise choice and control. Our Community Connectors team has found that many CALD families who were not satisfied with their providers, were unaware that they could change providers or how to do so. Other families who had received access to the NDIS did not know how to implement their plans.

Recommendation 2: We recommend that the new Early Childhood Approach include measures to build the capacity of children and families to understand their rights and exercise choice and control.

Collaboration and support to transition out of the Scheme

ECSC welcomes the recognition that many families need support to transition out of the Scheme and into mainstream and informal supports. We strongly support the recommendation for a three-month 'transition out' plan to be provided to families. We believe that this should sit alongside increased collaboration between the NDIS, Early Childhood Partners, government and mainstream services and community organisations, to ensure families can access the support they need. Many CALD families of children with disability are unaware of mainstream services available to them, or may lack access to informal support networks due to their migration history or isolation from their own communities.

Recommendation 3: We recommend that the new Early Childhood Approach facilitates strengthened connections between the NDIS, Early Childhood Partners, government and mainstream services and community organisations.

Recommendation 4: We recommend that children and families are actively supported to connect with local supports during the 'transition out' phase. This phase should be able to be extended where complex situations have affected engagement with supports.

Equitable outcomes and culturally respectful approaches

ECSC welcomes the recognition that clear operational guidelines are required to ensure equity and consistency of decision-making. We believe that this goes hand in hand with culturally respectful and customised approaches to assessment and planning. Many CALD families face barriers to effective communication with Early Childhood Partners and service providers. These barriers may be language barriers, or due to a lack of understanding of the Australian disability services system and approaches to supporting children with disability. It is critical that Early Childhood Partners and NDIS staff have strong cultural responsiveness, and that early intervention practitioners demonstrate culturally respectful and customised approaches. These are part of providing support in natural settings, as families are much less likely to implement strategies which are culturally inappropriate or do not fit with their daily life.

Recommendation 5: We recommend that the new Early Childhood-specific Operating Guidelines and 'provider outcomes reports' emphasise the importance of culturally responsive practice in achieving equitable outcomes.

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