



FIRST, WE BUILD IT

Reimagine Australia's Response to the
Thriving Kids Announcement

POSITION STATEMENT

August 2025

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Who We Are

Reimagine Australia is the national peak body advancing systemic reform for children with disability, developmental delay, neurodivergence, and developmental vulnerabilities, inclusive of children who experience trauma, family violence, poverty, systemic exclusion, and bias and discrimination.

We developed and authored the Reimagine Early Childhood National Action Plan to 2030, a co-designed roadmap endorsed by families, practitioners, researchers, and service providers across Australia, as funded by the Australian Government. Our mission is to ensure every child - regardless of ability, culture, background, or postcode - is met with inclusive, safe, and person-centred supports that allow them to thrive.

This vision underpins our ChildKind Best Practice Framework and its 3 core pillars - Understand Me, Support Me, Enable Me. It aligns with our National Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention (2nd Edition), the National Quality Standards, the Early Years Learning Framework, the ARACY Common Approach, the NDIS Workforce Capability Framework, Australia's obligations under the UNCRC and UNCRPD, and multiple other frameworks that guide evidence based best practice approaches in early childhood development.

These frameworks are not optional references; they represent contemporary research, and Australia's obligations under international human rights law. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) require the government to progressively realise, not regress, children's and families' rights to support, inclusion, and participation. Disability justice frameworks go further, reminding us that interdependence, leadership of those most impacted, and dismantling medicalised gatekeeping are essential to building systems that truly honour children and families.

A Sense of Abandonment

The Thriving Kids announcement delivered by The Hon. Mark Butler MP, Minister for Health, Ageing, Disability and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (20 August 2025), whilst ambitious and optimistic in its goals and approach presents multiple concerns that risk added stress and complexity to families of children with disability, developmental delay, neurodivergence, and developmental vulnerabilities.

Families expected reform to be co-designed, not imposed. Instead, they awoke to what feels like a top-down policy decision that shifts children from the NDIS into a \$2 billion "foundational supports" program - without consultation, without trust, and without the voices of those most impacted.

Families already feel abandoned, and in this speech, the framing risked positioning families as the problem, even if not stated explicitly. This needs to be reconsidered in order to ensure families receive the respect and reverence they

deserve when navigating such complexity, coupled with the grief and stress that often accompanies navigating such systems.

Families consistently describe the experience of navigating supports as “a second full-time job” - one done while exhausted, grieving, and fighting for recognition. Any reform that does not begin with this lived reality risks deepening trauma instead of repairing it.

Minister Butler suggested diagnostic practices were being stretched, with some children receiving diagnoses primarily to access support. This framing risks positioning families as the problem, rather than recognising they are forced to navigate inadequate systems to secure their children’s rights.

This is not co-design. This is not restorative. For many, this is retraumatising.

Why Advocates Are Concerned This Won’t Work

1. The “Unsustainability” Myth

The Minister framed the NDIS as financially unsustainable, pointing to growth driven by children with autism and developmental delay. This framing is misleading.

Investment in children is the most cost-effective reform government can make. Every \$1 invested in early childhood inclusion saves multiple dollars across health, education, justice, and welfare.

NDIS expenditure for children with autism and developmental delay remains modest compared to other budget items (such as tax concessions, aged care, defence). To call supports for children unsustainable while leaving other expenditures untouched feels like economic injustice.

Whilst we share the Ministers concern for a financially sustainable NDIS, ambition must be matched with structural redesign, or it risks becoming harm. When cuts are framed as ambition, the language of hope is misused, and families are left with deeper inequity and exclusion instead of repair and renewal.

2. Funding Shortfall

The current NDIS spend for children with autism and developmental delay (2022–23) is ~\$3.1b annually. The proposed Thriving Kids envelope is \$2b. That’s 36% less than what is currently spent, without factoring inflation, population growth, or workforce demand. While the Minister framed this as a redesign rather than a cut, the net effect is fewer dollars available for children’s supports - meaning inequity will likely grow, not shrink.

3. Removing Before Building

Community supports dismantled at the birth of the NDIS have never been rebuilt - a context absent from the Minister’s framing. Families cannot be ‘transitioned’ into a system that does not yet exist.

To stand up a new system without careful codesign, and without yet having support from the States and Territories, with only a 12 month window to implementation, feels like it may cause unintended harm, and hinder the goals that Thriving Kids aims to achieve. The restorative approaches that are desperately needed require repair before removal.

4. Mainstream Systems Already Failing

The Minister argued that children with mild to moderate developmental delay or autism are a “broad-based, mainstream issue that should be supported by broad-based, mainstream services” such as health, early learning, and schools. Yet evidence shows these systems are already failing to meet the development needs and outcomes of all children:

- The Disability Royal Commission and Productivity Commission have both found systemic exclusion, under-resourcing, and inequity.
- Only 52% of Australian children are developmentally on track by the time they start school. (AEDC 2024)
- Almost 1 in 2 children begin school developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain.
- Closing the Gap targets for early childhood development and school readiness are not on track for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- Thousands of children aged 0-8 are experiencing long wait times for developmental assessments and early intervention supports.
- Many children with disability, neurodivergence, or developmental delay face ongoing exclusion across early years systems, namely the ECEC sector which is also failing at protecting children and keeping them safe.
- Early childhood systems remain difficult to navigate for families experiencing disadvantage, trauma, or cultural exclusion.

Without structural redesign, placing responsibility back into these systems simply sets them up to fail again.

These failures disproportionately harm children at the intersections of multiple marginalisations - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, CALD families, LGBTQIA+ families, disabled parents, and families experiencing poverty and trauma. Any reform must embed trauma-informed, cultural safety, and intersectional approaches from the outset.

5. The “Short-Term Delay” Fallacy

The Minister described autism and developmental delay as “short-term” for many children. This ignores the evidence - autism is lifelong, including so-called ‘mild and moderate’ forms. Developmental delay often requires sustained, early support to prevent longer-term disability. Whilst Thriving Kids aims at providing that early support, without looking at a whole of systems approach - it risks not addressing the multiple factors that create Australia’s “wait and see” culture that hinders and often prevents early and timely supports.

6. “Returning Kids to Childhood”

The Minister argued Thriving Kids will “let kids be kids” instead of “patients in clinics.” We share this goal - but we fear his approach undermines it. Reimagine also calls for inclusion, participation, and childhood joy - but this requires strong, community-based ecosystems of support, not defunding. Families want fewer clinics, not fewer supports.

7. Reinforcing the Medical Model

By centring diagnosis thresholds, Medicare items, and clinic sessions, the proposal risks reinforcing a medical model of disability.

Best practice - as defined by all the best practice frameworks we've referenced - requires a social model of disability, grounded in human rights, disability justice, and restorative justice. Supports must focus on inclusion, participation, and family capacity-building, not medical gatekeeping.

8. Urban Privilege, Regional Neglect

The Minister's speech did not address regional, rural, or equity issues in detail - an omission that risks worsening service deserts for the families already most excluded. Thriving Kids will inevitably favour urban families with service access, leaving rural, regional, and disadvantaged families stranded in service deserts. Equity is not an optional add-on - it must be designed in from the start.

9. Workforce Narrowing

While The Minister acknowledged allied health shortages, his solution leaned heavily on Medicare and GP-based supports. This is insufficient.

The Action Plan, ChildKind as well as many other advocates call for a diversified workforce: peer navigators, educators, community workers, disability practitioners, and family support roles alongside allied health. Without this breadth, the reform will collapse under workforce shortages.

Already, rural and regional families face wait times of 18-24 months for basic developmental assessments. Allied health shortages are at crisis levels, and the proposal does not address the urgent need to grow and diversify the workforce through peer navigators, community connectors, and family workers.

10. Burdening Families with More Complexity

Families already face fragmented, siloed systems (health, education, disability, community). Adding another program layer increases confusion and stress. Current mainstream systems - maternal and child health, GPs, early learning, schools - are already failing to meet children's needs.

The Cost of Getting It Wrong

The risk is not abstract. If Thriving Kids proceeds as proposed:

- Children will be left unsupported.
- Families will face greater stress and trauma.
- Inequities will deepen across regions and communities.
- Australia will see a generation more disabled than they should be - not because of their differences, but because the government did not take the opportunity to boldly co-design a cohesive and visionary approach that reflects the evidence, best practice, and live-experience.

A Better Way

The ChildKind Best Practice Framework and the Reimagine Early Childhood Action Plan to 2030, along with multiple other frameworks from multiple peak bodies and organisations that advocate for these children and their families already provide the roadmap for redesign and reform. Our approaches were co-designed with families, practitioners, and communities, and both are grounded in human rights, disability justice, and restorative practice.

The Action Plan calls for:

- Family Navigators to walk alongside families as trusted guides.
- A diversified workforce strategy that builds capacity across allied health, educators, peers, and community roles.
- Integrated ecosystems of support that remove silos between health, education, disability, and community.
- Outcomes frameworks to track progress and ensure accountability.

These recommendations remain unaddressed in the Thriving Kids announcement, despite being repeatedly raised by families and practitioners.

Our Vision: First, We Build It

Reimagine calls for the creation of one cohesive, integrated early childhood development ecosystem, overseen by an Office of Early Childhood or National Early Childhood Commission - as set out in our Reimagine Early Childhood National Action Plan to 2030, and further iterated in our Reimagine Statement. This ecosystem must be:

- Holistic: grounded in the ChildKind Best Practice Framework (Understand Me, Support Me, Enable Me), and the multiple frameworks developed by other peak advocacy organisations who walk alongside families, carers, practitioners, and communities and know what's needed.
- Equitable: accessible in every community, not just the urban privileged.
- Preventative: designed to catch children at the “red flag” stage with responsive, safe, family-centred and timely supports.
- Bold and visionary: a once-in-a-generation reform that delivers transformative, lifelong dividends for children, families, and the nation.
- Administered by an independent body, with cross-portfolio accountability spanning health, education, disability, and justice. It must be transparent, outcomes-focused, and co-designed in partnership with families and communities - not developed behind closed doors.

What we need is real structural redesign that breaks down silos and reform that ensures we do not repeat models of the past under a new banner. Real children's futures, real families in crisis, are depending on us.

Our Call to Government

The disability and other vulnerable communities and their allies have spoken and have told us "nothing for us, without us" that means we need to co-design approaches that are embedded in lived experience and the real needs of all families, especially the most marginalised and excluded. We see the opportunity presented here as one that can create generational change and build one transformative, cohesive, and inclusive early childhood ecosystem. Our key considerations and requests to government are:

- Pause the Thriving Kids rollout. Do not remove children with disability and developmental delay from the NDIS until a fully and carefully co-designed, funded, and equitable early childhood system exists.
- Engage in real co-design and partnership with organisations like Reimagine and other respective peak bodies to achieve the outcomes and impact we all seek.
- Fund at scale. Match, at minimum, the current annual NDIS spend for children with autism and developmental delay (~\$3.1b), indexed to growth and demand.
- Build community supports first. Refund and rebuild the community infrastructure stripped at NDIS inception, ensuring consistency across states and territories.
- Adopt the social model. Abandon deficit-driven, medicalised eligibility tests and embed the ChildKind framework as the national foundation for practice.
- Establish an Office of Early Childhood. Ensure oversight, accountability, and national consistency in reform and delivery.

Conclusion

We believe children are our future. But this isn't it. Families deserve better. Children deserve better. Australia deserves better.

Restorative reform means repair, not removal. It means listening first, building with families, and ensuring no child is left unsupported. To get this right, we must pause, reflect, and rebuild together - with care, justice, and vision at the centre.

First, we build it.

Relevant Resources:

- The Reimagine National Action Plan to 2030 can be found [here](#).
- The Reimagine Statement can be found [here](#).
- The Childkind Website can be found [here](#).
- The Childkind Best Practice Guidelines can be found [here](#).
- The Childkind Best Practice Framework can be found [here](#).

INSERT CO-SIGNATORIES

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