REIMAGINE AUSTRALIA

SECTOR STATEMENT

Child safety must be more than a regulatory obligation.

It must be the foundation of our early childhood systems.

Reimagine Australia's response to the ABC Four Corners investigation *Monstrous* and to abuse in early childhood education and care.



Monday 2 November 2026

Reimagine Australia is deeply disturbed by the abuse of babies and toddlers exposed in the ABC Four Corners investigation *Monstrous*. We are equally disturbed by the failures in safeguarding, oversight and accountability that allowed that abuse to occur, to continue and, for at least one family, to remain unexplained more than two years later.

Our thoughts are first and foremost with the children and families whose lives have been affected. No child should experience violence, abuse, neglect or mistreatment in a setting entrusted with their care, education and development. Families should be able to trust that their children will be safe, respected, nurtured and protected.

These revelations demand more than condemnation, stronger compliance measures or another round of regulatory adjustment. They demand an honest and comprehensive examination of the systems, institutions, policies and cultures that shape the experiences of Australia's youngest children.

At the heart of that examination is one question. How can a system designed to support children's learning, development and wellbeing continue to fail in its most basic responsibility, which is to keep them safe?

> "The youngest child harmed was 13 months old. He could not tell anyone what was happening to him. Babies, and many children with disability or developmental delay, depend entirely on the adults and systems around them to notice, to understand and to act. For this little boy, those adults and systems did not act in time."
>
> Marlene Fox, Chair, Reimagine Australia

01

These failures were systemic, not only individual

The person who committed these assaults has been convicted and imprisoned, and must be held fully accountable. But we cannot allow a focus on individual wrongdoing to obscure the wider conditions that enable harm to occur, to remain undetected and to go inadequately addressed.

The Four Corners reporting describes failures at almost every level of the system:

1. A worker without early childhood qualifications was moved into the baby room and could lawfully be left alone with infants while studying.
2. Colleagues had observed rough handling of children, and there were warning signs about her conduct that were not acted on.

3. After a request was made to check the CCTV, she remained at the centre, with the children, for almost another week.
4. The report that triggered the police investigation came from a member of the community, not from the provider.
5. The regulator later identified failures in governance, supervision and risk management across the provider's services, a matter that remains before the courts.
6. More than two years on, the family has still not been given the regulator's findings about what happened to their child.
7. The service was one of 473 that Four Corners identified as operating outside the National Quality Framework, which meant families had no national quality rating to consult and some national safeguards did not apply.

Each of these was a point at which a system should have protected a child, especially as this was not an isolated case. The same Four Corners investigation documented repeated breaches involving supervision and protection from harm at services inside the national framework, including those operated by some large for-profit providers.

We acknowledge the honesty of the Federal Minister for Early Childhood Education, who said that not enough had been done by providers, by regulators or by governments. That acknowledgement must now be matched by reform and structural change equal to the scale of the problem.

02

Child safety cannot be measured by regulatory compliance alone

Australia has established regulatory frameworks, quality standards and oversight mechanisms intended to safeguard children and promote quality early childhood education and care. Yet the continued exposure of serious abuse and institutional failure raises significant questions about how well these arrangements work in practice.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) and National Quality Standard (NQS) play an important role in setting expectations for quality and safety. Reimagine Australia supports bringing every government-funded service within the NQF. However, compliance with regulatory requirements, positive quality ratings and the existence of policies and procedures cannot, in themselves, demonstrate that children are safe.

Harm most often occurs in the everyday conditions that periodic assessment rarely sees: unsafe organisational cultures, inadequate supervision, inappropriate practices and warning signs that are noticed but not acted on. With around 350 services that have failed the national standards twice in a row going, on average, more than three years between assessments, we must ask whether our systems of assessment, monitoring and regulation are equipped to identify and respond to these conditions.

That scrutiny must extend beyond individual services and providers. It must include the effectiveness of state and territory regulatory authorities, the national governance arrangements that support them, and the policy settings within which they operate.

> A system cannot be considered effective simply because it meets its own standards while children continue to experience preventable harm within it.

03

Children's rights, voices and experiences must be central to reform

Children are not passive recipients of care. They are individuals with inherent rights to safety, dignity, participation, inclusion and protection from harm, as recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Yet too often the systems designed to protect children are organised around adult decision-making, institutional processes and regulatory requirements, rather than around children's lived experience.

Babies, toddlers and young children may not have the language, developmental capacity or opportunity to communicate abuse, neglect or distress in ways adults readily recognise. They communicate through their bodies and behaviour: by withdrawing, clinging, crying, avoiding a particular adult, or changing how they eat, sleep and play. Their safety depends on the ability and willingness of the adults and institutions around them to observe, listen, understand and respond.

This responsibility is greatest for children who communicate differently or need additional support to express their needs, preferences and concerns.

Meaningful safeguarding must therefore go beyond mandatory reporting obligations, incident procedures and compliance requirements. It must be embedded in everyday relationships, interactions, organisational cultures and professional practice. Children must be recognised as active participants in their own lives, and their experiences must shape how we define, assess and deliver safety and quality.

04

Disability inclusion and child protection are inseparable

For Reimagine Australia, these findings reinforce an urgent truth: disability and disability inclusion, developmental support, and child protection and safety cannot be treated as separate or competing responsibilities. Yet children with disability and developmental delay are often largely absent from responses to such investigations and from discussions about child safety. Too often, disability and disability inclusion are treated as a separate issue, reflecting a much broader problem: a fragmented and siloed early years service system that too often competes more than it collaborates.

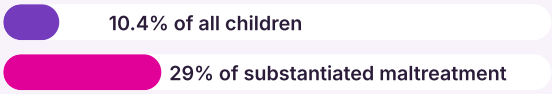
This kind of inclusion and collaboration is critical, as the evidence of heightened risk for children with disability is substantial:

2×

A 2022 systematic review and meta-analysis of 98 studies, covering about 16.8 million children, found that children with disability had **more than twice the odds** of experiencing violence compared with their peers.[1]

29%

A Western Australian population study of more than 520,000 children found that children with disability made up **10.4% of children** but **29% of those with a substantiated maltreatment allegation**.[2]



Evidence from early childhood settings points the same way. In a 2022 national survey of families about their children's experiences of early childhood education and care, conducted by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), one in five reported that their child had been refused enrolment, 28% reported bullying by other children or staff, and almost two in five (39%) disagreed that educators and support staff had the training needed to provide a supportive environment for their child.[3] Around one in five also reported that their child had experienced restrictive practices (18%) or seclusion (20%), although the survey did not specify where these occurred. The survey was small and not nationally representative, but it is one of the few sources of data on these experiences in early childhood settings. That gap is itself a finding.

These findings demand explicit consideration in any national response to child safety in early childhood education and care.

Children with disability, developmental delay, neurodivergence and developmental vulnerability may face additional barriers to having their needs understood, their communication recognised, their concerns believed and their rights upheld. Children who communicate differently, or who rely on adults for personal care and everyday activities, can be more exposed to unsafe situations and have fewer opportunities for harm to be identified or disclosed.

These risks are compounded by ableism, exclusionary practices, gaps in workforce capability, inappropriate behaviour management and restrictive practices. When distress is misread as "challenging behaviour", when signs of trauma are attributed to a child's disability or diagnosis, or when children cannot access appropriate adjustments and communication supports, opportunities to recognise and respond to harm are lost.

These concerns are not new. The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability documented serious systemic failures, including the consequences of institutional cultures, discrimination, restrictive practices, inaccessible communication and inadequate accountability. Its findings and recommendations must inform the reforms now being considered for Australia's early childhood systems.

Critically, the heightened risk experienced by children with disability is not an inevitable consequence of disability. It arises from the barriers, practices and institutional conditions that increase exposure to harm or prevent children from accessing effective protection, and those conditions can be changed.

An inclusive early childhood system must therefore do more than provide access. It must ensure every child is genuinely safe, supported, understood and able to participate. In practice, that means:

- safeguarding policies, educator qualifications and professional development that are disability-informed, neuro-affirming, trauma-informed and culturally safe
- accessible communication, appropriate adjustments and advocacy pathways for children
- complaints and reporting mechanisms that families of children with disability can genuinely use
- regulatory oversight and incident data that make the experiences of children with disability visible
- stronger ways to recognise harm experienced by children who cannot disclose it through conventional means
- genuine partnership with families, who often know first when something is wrong

Importantly, access to safeguarding, communication supports, reasonable adjustments and responsive care must never depend on a formal diagnosis, disability identification or eligibility for funded supports such as the NDIS. Children with emerging developmental differences and unidentified support needs must be equally recognised and protected. Our systems too often wait for diagnosis, eligibility or crisis before responding. Safeguarding must instead be proactive and responsive to every child, whether or not their needs have been formally documented.

There can be no meaningful commitment to child safety without an equally meaningful commitment to disability inclusion and children's individual rights. A system that fails to safeguard children with disability cannot claim to be safe or inclusive for any child.

> "Disability inclusion and child protection are not separate agendas. Every educator needs the skills to recognise how a baby, a toddler or a child with disability communicates distress, and every service needs the systems to act on it the same day."
>
> Marlene Fox, Chair, Reimagine Australia

05

Children do not live in policy portfolios

Australia's early childhood landscape remains fragmented across education and care, health, disability, child protection, early intervention and family support. Each operates under different policy, funding, regulatory and accountability arrangements, across Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

For children and families, these divisions create gaps in communication, early identification, referral, support and safeguarding. They produce unclear responsibilities and inconsistent practice. They also mean missed opportunities to intervene before concerns escalate.

This matters most for children with disability and developmental delay, who are often known to several systems at once (an early childhood service, a GP or paediatrician, allied health practitioners, the NDIS and, into the future, Thriving Kids services and foundational supports) without any one of them holding a complete picture of the child.

Children do not experience their lives in separate portfolios or service systems. Their safety, development, health, wellbeing, relationships and participation are interconnected, and the systems around them must reflect this. Reform must therefore extend beyond individual service settings and regulatory boundaries. It must strengthen collaboration, information sharing, coordinated responses and multidisciplinary approaches across the whole early childhood ecosystem, so that responsibility for a child's safety is never lost between services, institutions or government departments.

06

Workforce standards must match the responsibility we place on educators

The great majority of early childhood educators are deeply committed to children's safety and wellbeing, including some of the staff in this case, who raised concerns about the worker's conduct. But longstanding, well-documented concerns about workforce capacity, ratios, qualifications, training quality, working conditions and professional development have direct consequences for children's safety. Educators, sector representatives, researchers and government inquiries have raised these concerns for years.

Supervision and ratios

No educator should ever be alone with infants, and staff who are not yet qualified should always work under direct supervision. Reimagine Australia supports Early Childhood Australia's call for at least two educators to be with children at all times. Beyond this, minimum educator-to-child ratios must be critically examined. Meeting a numerical requirement does not guarantee adequate supervision, particularly where educators are managing complex developmental and behavioural needs, administrative demands and staffing pressure at the same time. Ratios must reflect the additional time, attention and support that inclusive, responsive care requires.

Qualifications and preparation

Certificate III and Diploma qualifications are important pathways into the profession, but the expectations placed on educators must be matched by rigorous preparation, practical experience, ongoing learning and professional supervision. Every educator should be able to:

- recognise and respond to abuse, neglect and distress, including in children who cannot speak about it
- understand child development and the many ways young children communicate
- implement inclusive and neuro-affirming practice
- respond appropriately to children with disability, developmental delay, trauma experiences and additional support needs

Conditions and investment

Persistent staffing shortages, a burnt-out workforce at risk of moral injury, inadequate pay, high workloads, turnover and limited access to mentoring and supervision undermine continuity of care, organisational capability and educators' capacity to provide safe and responsive environments. These are matters of quality and safety, not only industrial matters. Governments, regulators and providers share responsibility for ensuring that workforce expectations are backed by sustainable funding, appropriate staffing, professional recognition and practical resources.

These challenges call for more than incremental adjustment. Australia needs a comprehensive examination of whether its workforce standards, qualification pathways, staffing models, funding arrangements and professional development systems are fit for purpose, and whether they reflect the complexity of caring for, educating and safeguarding young children.

07

Institutional accountability must be meaningful and transparent

When warning signs are overlooked, complaints are inadequately addressed, unsafe practices persist, or families struggle to find out what happened to their children, these are not administrative shortcomings. They are failures with profound and lasting consequences for children and families.

Accountability must extend beyond individual perpetrators to service providers, organisational leadership, governing bodies, regulators and governments. That means examining:

- how concerns are identified, escalated and investigated within services
- how quickly and independently regulators respond, and how decisions are made
- whether governance arrangements, including conflicts of interest, are adequately scrutinised
- whether existing mechanisms carry sufficient independence, transparency and consequences when institutions fail

Families must be treated as partners in safeguarding. They need accessible, transparent and responsive ways to raise concerns, seek information and pursue accountability without fear of dismissal or reprisal. That includes a right to timely, clear information about regulatory findings concerning their own child. No family should still be waiting, two years later, to learn what an investigation found.

Children and families should not bear the burden of navigating complex institutional processes to establish whether their rights were protected.

08

Meaningful reform requires more than new rules

Reimagine Australia recognises the significant reforms of the past year, including making children's safety and wellbeing the paramount consideration in National Law, tougher penalties, mandatory child safety training and the National Early Childhood Worker Register. Strengthening regulatory safeguards, improving oversight and holding those responsible for harm to account all remain essential.

But legislation, regulation, standards and enforcement are not sufficient on their own. Australia must move from a largely reactive approach to child safety towards one that actively prevents harm, by strengthening the conditions in which children are cared for, supported and protected.

That requires sustained investment in workforce capability, professional supervision, leadership, safe organisational cultures, accessible complaints and reporting mechanisms, and real partnership with children and families. It also requires adequate funding and practical implementation support, so that services have the knowledge, resources, staffing and capability to turn safeguarding expectations into consistent everyday practice. Expecting remote and community-controlled services to meet national standards without the investment to do so would risk closing services that communities depend on. The closure of the services in this case has already left remote communities without care they relied on.

The circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities, children with disability, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children experiencing social or geographic disadvantage must be explicitly considered in designing and implementing reform. Reform must uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination and community-controlled approaches, while ensuring that every child benefits from strong, consistent and culturally safe protections.

Reimagine Australia supports the calls made by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children in response to the investigation. We join SNAICC in calling for nationally consistent standards of care that reflect the importance of culture, cultural safety and connection to Country, and for sustainable, reliable funding for Aboriginal community-controlled services, recognising, as SNAICC has said, that “reliability of funding is reliability of safety”. We urge all governments to implement the new funding model for Aboriginal community-controlled early childhood services that the Joint Council on Closing the Gap agreed in July 2024 to work towards, and we support SNAICC’s call for any national commission to be informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expertise.

> **The measure of successful reform cannot be how many new policies, standards or institutions we establish. It must be whether children are safer, their rights are upheld, families are heard, and the systems entrusted with their care are demonstrably more responsive and accountable.**

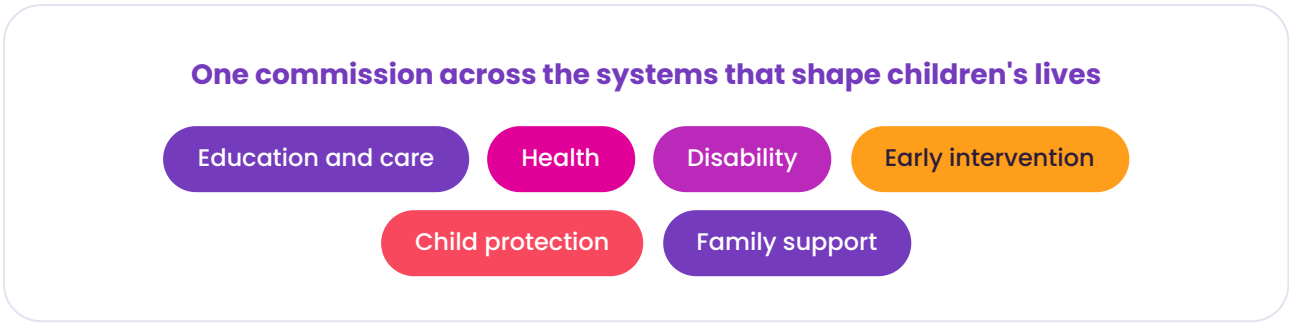
09

A National Early Childhood Commission for the whole of early childhood

Reimagine Australia supports calls, including from leading not-for-profit providers, for a national commission to strengthen oversight, accountability and child safety. We also agree with the National Children’s Commissioner that responsibility for children’s safety and wellbeing remains fragmented across portfolios.

We believe the opportunity for reform must extend beyond the regulation of early childhood education and care alone. Australia needs a **National Early Childhood Commission** whose mandate spans the entire early childhood ecosystem: education and care, health, disability, early intervention, child

protection, family support and the other systems that shape children's lives.



Such a commission should:

- provide national leadership and independent oversight, with the authority and resources to drive change across portfolios and jurisdictions
- drive cross-sector coordination and hold systems accountable for systemic failures
- support a universal, rights-based approach with consistent national expectations for children's safety, rights, voice, inclusion, development and access to support
- give particular attention to children with disability, developmental delay, neurodivergence and developmental vulnerability, children who have experienced adversity and trauma, and others facing barriers to participation and protection
- set nationally consistent approaches to recognising and responding to children's communication and expressions of distress
- strengthen early identification and timely access to support, without waiting for diagnosis or eligibility
- ensure children's rights and voices are reflected in policy, practice, safeguarding and accountability

A universal early childhood system must not mean a one-size-fits-all approach. National consistency must come with the flexibility, resources and accountability to respond equitably to children's diverse circumstances, developmental needs, cultures, identities and experiences. It must uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, community-controlled approaches and culturally safe governance.

The commission must also complement and strengthen existing regulatory and safeguarding bodies, not add another layer of fragmentation or institutional complexity. Any new national body must be judged on whether it delivers real improvements in prevention, practice and accountability.

As the *Reimagine Early Childhood National Action Plan to 2030* sets out, meaningful systems reform depends on overcoming the fragmentation and silos that undermine coordinated, inclusive and responsive support for children and families. A National Early Childhood Commission is an opportunity to bring sectors, governments, professionals, communities and families together around shared responsibilities, standards and outcomes.

10

What Reimagine Australia is calling for

Ahead of the coming meeting of education ministers, and as part of the longer reform agenda, Reimagine Australia calls on all governments to:

1. **Set minimum supervision standards in every service,** so that no educator is ever alone with infants, unqualified staff always work under direct supervision, and at least two educators are with children at all times.

2. **Bring all government-funded services into the National Quality Framework and fund the transition,** with dedicated investment in facilities and workforce for remote and community-controlled services, delivered in a way that upholds Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination.

3. **Make the safety of children with disability and developmental delay explicit in reform,** across mandatory child safety training, educator qualifications, National Quality Standard assessment and incident reporting, with data that makes their experiences visible.

4. **Embed the Disability Royal Commission's relevant findings** in early childhood safeguarding reform, including on restrictive practices, accessible communication and accountability.

5. **Build workforce capability to recognise harm,** so that every educator is trained to read non-verbal communication and distress and has access to professional supervision, and review ratios and qualification requirements against what inclusive, responsive care actually demands.

6. **Invest in the workforce** through sustainable funding, fair pay and conditions, and ongoing professional development.

7. **Guarantee families a right to information,** so that families receive timely, clear information about regulatory findings concerning their own child, and have accessible ways to raise concerns without fear of reprisal.

8. **Ensure protection never depends on diagnosis,** so that safeguarding, adjustments and support respond to children's needs as they emerge, not only once a diagnosis or NDIS eligibility is confirmed.

9. **Establish a National Early Childhood Commission** with a whole-of-childhood mandate, the independence and authority to act across portfolios and jurisdictions, and a design that strengthens rather than duplicates existing regulators.

10. **Co-design reform with children, families and communities,** including people with lived experience of disability, exclusion, abuse, adversity and institutional failure.

11

A call for fundamental and lasting change

The findings of Four Corners must be a turning point for Australia's early childhood systems.

We cannot keep responding to serious failures through isolated reforms while the structural, cultural and institutional conditions that contribute to them go unexamined. Nor can we treat child safety, disability inclusion, early childhood development, family wellbeing and institutional accountability as separate policy priorities. They are inseparable parts of a system that must be designed around the rights, needs and experiences of children.

Reimagine Australia calls for a comprehensive, nationally coordinated and rights-based approach to reform. That approach must place children and families at the centre, strengthen independent accountability, address systemic fragmentation, and invest in the workforce, services and communities that support Australia's youngest children.

We owe it to every child to move beyond a culture of compliance towards a culture of genuine safety, inclusion, prevention, responsiveness and accountability. Every child has the right to be safe, heard, understood, included and supported to thrive.

Our responsibility is not only to strengthen the systems we have, but to build the coordinated, accountable and rights-based early childhood system that every child and family deserves. That must be the standard against which Australia's early childhood systems are judged.

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About Reimagine Australia

Reimagine Australia, formerly Early Childhood Intervention Australia, has been the national peak body for young children with disability and developmental delay and their families since 1986.

We work with families, practitioners, services and governments so that every child has every opportunity to thrive, and we lead the *Reimagine Early Childhood National Action Plan to 2030*.

Media and stakeholder enquiries

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