

POLICY BRIEF

The National Disability Insurance Scheme Must Facilitate Greater Access to Evidence-Based Parenting Support

Executive Summary

- Parenting programs have been shown to enhance lasting skill development associated with participation and day-to-day functioning in children with neurodevelopmental and sensory disabilities.
- An inadvertent consequence of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is that fewer parents are accessing evidence-based parenting support and fewer children benefiting from optimal parenting practices.
- The NDIS should incorporate mechanisms to permit greater access and participation in evidence-based parenting support.

Current State of Play

Since the Australian Government's NDIS came into full operation in 2020, agencies are no longer block funded to provide parenting support. Instead, parents negotiate with NDIS planners for the services they will receive within their disability support plan¹. There is inconsistency in the provision of parenting support through the NDIS and confusion amongst parents, service providers, and NDIS planners as to whether parenting support may be funded through the scheme. Parenting support is less likely to be provided since it requires parents (and NDIS planners) to have to have knowledge of parenting programs, their benefits, and to advocate for them. Further, compared to individually delivered parenting programs, group programs are less likely to be funded because these require multiple parents/caregivers to request the same service. The consequence is that parents are less likely to access this form of support, and children do not benefit from optimal parenting practices during their formative early years².

What's At Stake?

Parents and caregivers have a central role in optimising their children's development and wellbeing³. Children with neurodevelopmental disabilities, such as autism, cerebral palsy, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and intellectual disability, typically require high-impact teaching practices and additional opportunities to learn communication, language and daily-living skills⁴. Parents and carers are children's first teachers and have a pervasive influence on children in their early years. Parenting practices have been found to be an important modifiable factor for optimal child development⁵. As such, it is vital that parents of children who have a range of disabilities receive high-quality support for their important role.

How do Children with a Disability Benefit from Parenting Support?

Parenting affects many different aspects of a child's development. Parenting is the common pathway through which many interrelated developmental goals relating to children's language, capacity for self-regulation, relationship with siblings and peers, cognitive functioning, mental health, and overall well-being can be supported¹. Specifically, for children with developmental disability, the lasting benefits of parenting support has been shown to:

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- Promote language and communication (e.g., initiating communication, vocabulary, functional use of communication)^{7, 8, 9, 10}.
- Build social and peer interaction skills (e.g., joint attention, play skills)^{11, 12, 13}.
- Enhance daily living skills (e.g., dressing skills, toileting skills)^{14, 15}.
- Strengthen emotion-regulation, reduce challenging behaviour, increase children's community participation, and learning readiness^{16, 17, 18}.
- Reduce mental health symptoms and enhance children's wellbeing^{19, 20, 21}.

How do Families with a Children with a Disability Benefit from Parenting Support?

Parents and other family members also benefit from participating in parenting programs. Parents of children with a disability who participate in evidence-based parenting support report:

- Enhanced parenting skills^{5, 20, 21}.
- Less conflict within the home^{5, 16, 20, 21}.
- Less stress^{5, 20, 21, 22}.
- Stronger and happier relationships with all family members^{5, 20, 21}.

Enhanced parenting skills, less conflict and stress, and stronger relationships within the home increase parents' capacity to support their children's development^{23, 24}.

Is Parenting Support Cost Effective?

Evidence-based parenting programs typically result in considerably more savings than the cost of implementing them¹. In the case of parenting support for families who have a child with a disability, cost savings often stems from an increased capacity of parents to return to work⁵. They represent a means of sustainable support for children with a disability^{25, 26, 27}.

Policy Recommendations

- The benefits of evidence-based parenting support for children and families should be promoted to NDIS planners, parents/guardians, and agencies providing NDIS supports.
- While the primacy of individual service selection should be retained, mechanisms should be introduced that will increase access and participation in evidence-based parenting programs including group programs. Organisations need to be funded to organise and deliver parenting support.
- A clinical audit should be conducted to determine the nature of supports being provided to children with disabilities under the NDIS.

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