Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter)

Inquiry into social inclusion and Victorians with a disability

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For general enquiries please contact:

Lauren Matthews Executive Officer
ECIA VC

T 03 9819 5266 W www.eciavic.org.au

Our Vision: for young children of all abilities to fully participate in family and community life right from the start
Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter) (ECIA VC) is the peak organisation promoting the interests of young children with disabilities and developmental delays and their families. The vision of ECIA VC is for young children of all abilities to fully participate in family and community life. Early childhood intervention is provided in a variety of settings and supports those children who have a disability or a developmental delay and their families from birth until school age. These services are crucial to ensuring that all children get the best start in life.

ECIA VC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Family and Community Development Committee’s Inquiry into social inclusion and Victorians with a disability and would like to highlight the particular needs of young children with disability and developmental delay and their families. The Terms of Reference and Submission Guide highlighted several areas of interest relevant to the concerns and expertise of ECIA VC which are:

- Social inclusion and participation;
- How to improve current government services on inclusion and participation in Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) and in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); and,
- The NDIS’s future impact on social inclusion.

ECIA VC is concerned that the Family and Community Development Committee’s definition of disability provided in its submission guide does not include developmental delay. ECIA VC’s interpretation of disability extends to include developmental delays. In the ECI field eligibility for services does not discriminate between children with disabilities or children with developmental delays. The National Disability Insurance Scheme Act (2013) outlines that children under six are eligible for early childhood intervention services if they have a disability or developmental delay. ECIA VC would like to see the Family and Community Development Committee’s definition of disability be expanded to include children with developmental delays in recognition of standard practice in the ECI field and the high level of needs which children with developmental delays often have, and the importance of supporting them to participate and be socially included.

Social Inclusion and Participation

In August 2012, ECIA National, in conjunction with Early Childhood Australia, released a Joint Position Statement on the Inclusion of children with disability in Early Childhood Education and Care which outlined why social inclusion is so integral:

> Every child has the capacity to make a unique contribution and to participate in a wide range of activities and contexts as a full member of a family, communities and our society.

We urge the Committee to look at the detail behind this principle and the many others in the Joint Position Statement and incorporate them into the findings of this Inquiry. The Statement can be found at http://www.ecia.org.au/advocacy/position-statements/statement-on-the-inclusion-of-children-with-disability.
In 2008, the Victorian Government embarked on a process of ECIS reform and as part of this a Literature Review was commissioned, which has since been used to guide practice and inform policy. The Early Childhood Intervention Reform Project’s Revised Literature Review identified four general reasons as to why ECI for children with disabilities or developmental delay geared towards social inclusion is so vital; ethical, developmental, economic and empirical.\(^1\)

**Ethical:** The ethical rationale for ECI acknowledges that there is a societal obligation to meet and protect the rights of children and their families. We owe all our children, irrespective of the level of their abilities, the best start in life.

**Developmental:** The developmental rationale for ECI is based on extensive research which confirms the importance of early interventions being more effective that efforts taken later in time due to brain development and young children’s receptivity to learning.

**Economic:** The economic rationale reflects the substantial research conducted in longitudinal studies which reinforce the well understood fact that adequate investment in high quality early childhood services is, in the long term, cost effective when considering the high cost of remediation or other interventions later in life.

**Empirical:** The empirical rationale is based on strong evidence which supports the understanding critical importance of high quality ECI services for children with a disability or developmental, both in the short and long term.


ECIA VC supports the values of both the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and National Quality Framework (NQF) and believes that inclusion should be measured by children’s performance in relation five primary desired outcomes for all children’s learning and development:

- Children have a strong sense of identity (identity)
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world (community)
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing (wellbeing)
- Children are confident and involved learners (learning)
- Children are effective communicators (communication).

ECIA VC believes that these 5 outcomes have universal value and should be included both in the definition for social inclusion and how it is measured for both adults and children, in the broader context of society as a whole rather than just in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

ECIA VC believes that participation is a fundamental right for all Victorians regardless of ability which inherently includes social inclusion as a minimum standard from which participation builds upon. Social

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inclusion is also an integral right for all Victorians, but participation is distinguished from it due to the complex, nuanced and proactive action it demands from individuals, organisations and the community at large. True, genuine participation is the best expression and result of fully realised equality which social inclusion promises. ECIA VC would compare social inclusion to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where social inclusion is critically important to people’s basic wellbeing as it forms the base of what people need for wellbeing and belonging.

Government Services on Social Inclusion and Participation

ECIA VC applauds the Government’s continual effort in improving the lives of people with disabilities but more is still required to ensure that those living with disabilities are given the best opportunity in life to succeed. Countless international studies, such as the Perry Preschool Project, shows that high quality inclusive ECEC is vital for assisting children in achieving improved outcomes, even beyond their childhood, with substantial savings in the areas of education, health, welfare and justice following in their teenage and adult years. This can be attributed to their overall improved wellbeing, skills and sense of identity and community – the foundations of which were laid in early childhood.

Currently, many early childhood educators in mainstream early childhood education and care services find it difficult to meaningfully include children with a disability and/or development delay in their programs. To support inclusion, staff in universal settings require expert advice, professional support, training and mentoring to learn more about the needs of individual children, promoting better outcomes for children and promote greater confidence in services about their ability to include children with disabilities. This training and development could be delivered in a partnership approach where ECIS professionals and early childhood educators can collaborate and learn from each other.

Social inclusion in universal services could be further strengthened by reforming and increasing investment in the Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS), which supports the access and participation of children with disabilities and/or high support needs in four year old kindergarten programs, and Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) programs, which provides support to government-funded kindergarten staff to support the access and participation of children in inclusive kindergarten programs. Currently both of these services provide strong inclusive support for children with disabilities or early developmental delays. However, if KIS adopted a more strengths based approach that provided additional support to the program (whether that be through training, facilities, equipment or additional staff for the entire service), rather than having a deficit focus on the individual child, inclusion could be better facilitated with service required to demonstrate their capacity, rather than on families to focus on their child’s ‘deficits’.

In addition, there is currently a very strict eligibility criterion for KIS, which means a number of children requiring some additional supports often miss out. There was also no increase to KIS packages funding in the 2013/14 Budget. Unless additional KIS packages are made available, KIS package funding is increased and the eligibility criteria widened, many children with a disability or developmental delay will not be able to access the meaningful kindergarten experience that they are entitled to with their sense of inclusion suffering because of it. We also recommend an increase in the current unit price to ensure high quality KIS assistants can be recruited and retained. Current funding limits the recruitment pool for these positions.
ECIA VC Victorian Chapter members and our colleagues in the Kindergarten sector would like to see the KIS program further enhanced to ensure it is strengths-based. We also recommend an increase in the current unit price to ensure high quality KIS assistants can be recruited and retained. Current funding limits the recruitment pool for these positions.

ECIA VC also recommends an increase in the Early Childhood Intervention Service (ECIS) unit price. The current unit price of $7,385 is insufficient to provide an adequate level of high quality support and this limits the level of participation of children with disabilities in the wider community.

While the additional 2013/14 State Budget investments of $34.3 million to create 1000 much-needed ECIS places over five years and additional $12.5 million to community health for allied health services in growth corridors have gone a long way to significantly reducing waiting lists across Victoria, further funding is still needed. Timely support is required to address children’s disabilities and/or developmental delays to prevent them from exacerbating and to maximise their future social inclusion and participation. While having sufficient places to ensure there was no waiting list would be ideal, ECIA VC appreciates the current difficult fiscal climate. An alternative, lower cost option that would still provide some welcome assistance to families, would be investing in waiting list support programs, to ensure that even while families are waiting to access ECIS, they are provided with a minimum level of service until they are able to access a fully funded ECIS place.

Changing the current culture of how children with disability and/or developmental delay engage with, and are perceived by, all the other children in their programs is essential. The United Nations notes that children with disability and/or developmental delay face higher levels exclusion than others through their school life, severely limiting their capacity to contribute and the outcomes of their education.2 This exclusion is perhaps the clearest in the ECEC field.

While the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 prevents ECEC services from discriminating against a child with disability, unless it will cause undue financial hardship to the ECEC provider, we know that in practice discrimination can and does occur. The current state of the system clearly reflects the predominantly poor inclusion practices in ECEC, in part due to an inadequacy of funding and supports. While some services refuse to accept enrolments of these children due to financial hardship, anecdotal evidence from ECIA VC members highlights that many services refuse enrolment due to negative attitudes to disability, inadequate training and support, and fear. A change in culture must be lead in conjunction with educators. However, currently many early childhood educators in mainstream early childhood education and care services find it difficult to meaningfully include children with a disability and/or development delay in their programs.

ECIA VC urges the Government to not only reform pre-service training requirements to ensure a greater component on inclusion, but also increase investment in the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) program to guarantee additional training on inclusion, particularly the inclusion of children with disability and/or developmental delay. In Victoria for example, only 1% of training offered by the PSC is related to inclusion. This is severely inadequate.

ECIA VC supports and promotes the Teaching Pyramid, which is currently adopted at a number of ECI and ECEC services in Victoria, as one example of best practice in the ECEC field. The Teaching Pyramid is

a social learning and behavioural support framework that integrates supports for all children with graduated additional support for those in greatest need. The Teaching Pyramid, developed by Mary Louise Hemmeter and colleagues, is a social learning and behavioural support framework supporting all children’s learning in early childhood education and care services and in family homes. It integrates support for all children with graduated additional support for those in greatest need.

Whilst most children are able to participate in all activities and learn when high quality environments and supportive relationships are provided (Tier 1), some children require more intentional teaching and support (Tier 2) and a small group require intensive support (Tier 3). Some children, such as those with a disability or development delay who are eligible for Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS), will require all three tiers of support and are more likely to need Tiers 2 and 3 supports than most of their peers.³ This model provides a strong universal, inclusive service which supports participation of children, even those with additional needs such as children with disabilities and developmental delays. The Teaching Pyramid is just one of many models that align with the VEYLDF and all models should be investigated and field tested so that we can develop meaningful models of inclusion.

Much of the work the Government and community puts into helping children with disabilities and developmental delays to feel supported and included can be lost if these children are not properly assisted in their transition from ECEC to school. For these transitions to be successful “it is important that discontinuities around learning, relationship building and support systems are minimised.”⁴ For children with a disability or development delay and their families ECIS plays a crucial role in supporting the child’s learning, development and connections – therefore making the role of ECIS in the transition to school and the exiting of ECIS even more important.

Currently ECIS provides significant support to children, families, early childhood educators and schools with the transition to school, however much of this work is done prior to school starting, with only minimal support, such as one visit to school, in Term One. Given the importance of the transition to school in relation to each child’s future life trajectory ECIA VC (VC) would like to see the role of ECIS extended into the first two terms of school. While we would not imagine this to involve a full ECIS service, or that it would mean that new children wouldn’t commence ECIS at the beginning of Term One, it could provide some additional support and connection to children and families as they go through the transition process. This could be in the form of additional funds to enable ECIS agencies to provide a place to new children, while providing a reduced level of support to exiting families.

The NDIS and Social Inclusion

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) presents a once in a generation to improve access to services and supports for people with a disability and ECIA VC is actively engaged in the trial site to ensure that the services young children and their families are adequately funded and delivered. The NDIS does however present both a challenge and opportunity when it comes to the intersection between specialist services, universal services and the community as a whole.

⁴ Centre for Community Child Health (2008), Policy Brief No 11: Rethinking the transition to school: Linking schools and early years services, www.rch.org.au/ccch/policybriefs.cfm
While the intersection between ECEC and the NDIS is currently unknown given the early stages of the NDIS trial, ECIA VC is concerned that an NDIS, with its focus on targeted and individualised services, could remove the inclusion mandate from universal services. It is vital both the Committee and the ECEC system do not just see children with disability and/or developmental delay as the NDIS’s ‘problem’. ECIA VC does not want to see a move back to a more segregated services system given the gains that have been made through the IPSP, the NQF and VEYLF and also the fundamental right of all children to access ECEC. Any move back to a more segregated ECEC services would be detrimental to social inclusion, isolating children with disabilities and developmental delays from their typically developing peers. It is extremely important that with the introduction of the NDIS that we do not lose the significant system and service model gains that we have made in early childhood intervention.

Despite children being mentioned in the NDIS Act and the governing policy frameworks, children with a disability or developmental delay often appear to be an afterthought in the current implementation of said policies. This raises several concerns for ECIA such as will there be enough NDIS staff with early childhood qualifications; issues regarding central intake being overwhelming or not inclusive; and children being left behind because they are on a visa and therefore not eligible to access the NDIS. ECIA VC are also concerned that with the adoption of the NDIS that children having reached the age of six and therefore no longer eligible for the NDIS, they will cease to receive support from the state without a residual system to pick them up. Furthermore, it is still unclear what the role of universal services, such as health and ECEC, will be for these children or those without a formal diagnosis which raises concerns that social inclusion may suffer.

While the NDIS is currently in trial phase, it is important that the impact on young children, their families and their inclusion be tracked in those trial sites, so that there can be the development of a responsive system come full scheme roll-out.

**Conclusion**

ECIA VC believes that this inquiry into social inclusion and Victorians with a disability provides a crucial opportunity to improve social inclusion and participation for all Victorians with disabilities. Government services in the ECI and ECEC have the most power to make a lasting impact on children’s lives and their future life trajectory as well as the next generation’s attitude on social inclusion.

Should you have any questions regarding this submission, or if you would like to organise a time to discuss it further, please contact Lauren Matthews, ECIA VC Executive Officer, T: 03 9819 5266.