



Submission to the Department of Social Services Consultation:

Foundational Supports for Children
with Developmental Concern, Delay
and/or Disability and their Families,
Carers and Kin

December 2024



learninglinks.org.au

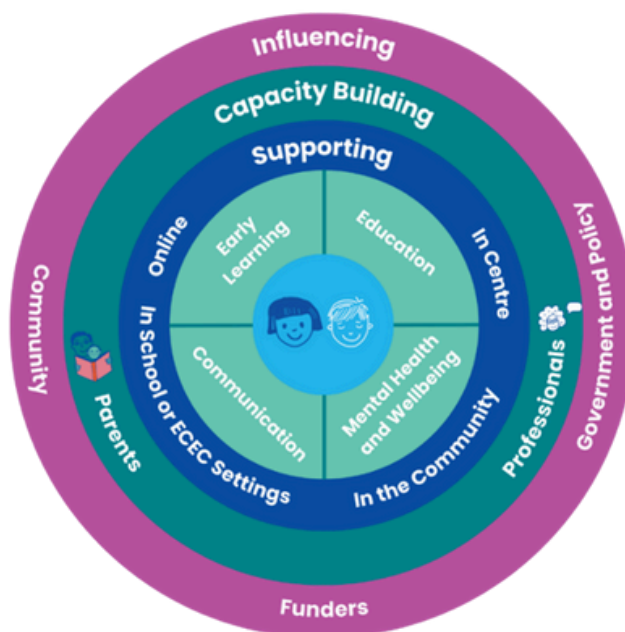


Learning Links is a not-for-profit organisation that was established in 1972. Our team is driven by the heartfelt belief that every child deserves the opportunity to learn, develop and thrive. It's the reason why we have been dedicated to supporting children who face difficulties with their learning to reach their full potential at school, and in life, for over 50 years.

We envisage a community where these children, regardless of their challenges, are understood and defined by their strengths, not their weaknesses. And that they have access to the supports that can help them to build confidence, learn alongside their peers and reach their goals.

Our large multidisciplinary team of passionate professionals is the heart of the organisation, working tirelessly to make this vision a reality. Our people are dedicated to providing high-quality, evidence-based support for literacy, numeracy, social-emotional skills, and speech and language development, and fostering inclusive learning environments where every child can thrive.

Learning Links' model of support reflects our multidisciplinary offering, diverse modes of delivery and holistic approach to enhancing children's learning outcomes by building the capacity of parents and professionals, and seeking to create broader change by working in partnership with community organisations, funders and all levels of government.



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Children Who Face Difficulties With Learning

Based on the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), we know that 20% of children start school in Australia with developmental vulnerabilities – around four children in a kindergarten class. Based on Learning Links' experience and recent studies that show the correlation between AEDC data and NAPLAN results in Years 3 and 5, we estimate that in the later years of primary school this increases, with seven to eight children in the average classroom facing difficulties with their learning.

The range of difficulties is broad, covering diagnosed disabilities, specific learning disorders like Dyslexia and Dyscalculia, ADHD, Autism and neurodevelopmental disorders, developmental delay, speech or language delays, mental health challenges, behavioural challenges, trauma or undiagnosed difficulties.

Children experiencing these difficulties are often the ones who were less likely to find a suitable early education service and needed to overcome a number of barriers when transitioning to school. And, once at school, they are the ones who struggle to keep up in the classroom, participate meaningfully, build friendships, and reach their personal and academic goals.

They face significant challenges building the foundational academic, functional and social skills they need for the future, which impacts confidence and self-esteem, and can lead to disengagement with learning, attendance issues, behavioural challenges, social isolation, long-term mental health issues, unemployment and financial disadvantage.

We work with these children every day at Learning Links, and we represent them in our recommendations.



Learning Links' Services

As a longstanding provider of multidisciplinary services for children with disabilities, developmental delay and a range of difficulties with learning, across clinical, early childhood, school and community settings, Learning Links has unique insight into the various systems that support families, including the NDIS.

In the 2023-24 financial year, our team supported over 1,600 children and families in our six Learning Centres across Sydney and online, offering assessments, speech therapy, counselling and specialist tutoring for literacy and numeracy for children and adolescents aged 2-18 years.

We delivered a comprehensive range of Tier 2 and Tier 3 programs in primary and high schools across NSW – working with 135 schools and just under 5,000 students. These programs include one-on-one, small-group and whole class literacy and numeracy, speech and language, assessment and psychosocial programs to build students' skills, confidence and capacity for learning.

The organisation also runs a number of programs supporting inclusion in early childhood education:

- Learning Links Preschool offers an inclusive and nurturing early learning environment where educators and allied health professionals work side by side. The centre has 20 enrolments supported by the NSW Disability and Inclusion Program that allows the team to support a large cohort of children with a range of high support needs.
- Our Prep 4 Preschool early intervention playgroup is funded by the NSW Department of Education Start Strong Pathways program, and supports more than 50 children with disabilities and developmental delay to transition successfully into an appropriate ECEC setting.
- Learning Links is a provider of the NSW Department of Education's Sector Capacity Building Program in over 40 community preschool settings in South Western Sydney
- The organisation has also been a provider of the DSS-funded HIPPY (Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters) in two communities, one for over 10 years.

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Funding Gaps for Families

Of the 1,600 children Learning Links supported in our centres or online in the 2023–24 financial year:

- 466 had access to NDIS funding for speech therapy and counselling services,
- 336 received partial Medicare rebates for speech therapy and counselling services, and
- more than 800 were not eligible for any funding and paid out-of-pocket for speech therapy, counselling, assessments and specialist education services.

While the children Learning Links sees are part of the 20% facing developmental vulnerabilities when they start school and in later years, in our experience less than one in three of these children has sufficient funding to access the support services they need, and more than half have no access to any funding at all.

This significant gap in access to funding aligns with figures showing that based on 1.8 million children aged 0–5 years in Australia (ABS Data), of the 20% or 360,000 who face vulnerabilities and should be supported to access services, only 103,000 have funding through the NDIS (as of Q4 FY23/24).

To address this funding shortfall that families face and reach as many children in need as possible, Learning Links seeks funding to fully or partially subsidise centre-based and school programs, with a particular focus on low socioeconomic areas and families facing financial disadvantage.

Funding for Learning Links' assessment, speech therapy, psychosocial and literacy and numeracy programs in schools was varied:

- Programs paid for by school partners reached 1,500 students.
- Programs funded by local, state and federal government schemes reached another 1,500 students.
- Programs funded by NSW ClubGRANTS scheme, trusts, foundations and corporate partnerships reached an additional 2,000 students.



Funding Gaps for Families Cont.

The impact of these programs is significant, with children who would otherwise miss out on support gaining access to programs that support their learning, communication, wellbeing and overall confidence.

When seeking to expand services into ECEC settings to reach children in need of additional support with speech, language and social-emotional skills, Learning Links has found centres do not have the budget nor capacity to facilitate the support.

While programs such as the NSW Government funded Sector Capacity Building provides guidance for community-based preschools with inclusive practices, there are limitations in its delivery that prevents direct or more intensive supports by allied health professionals being provided for children in the same way they can be given in the school system.

These gaps in provision of supports in ECEC settings place further responsibility and financial burden on families to seek external, out of pocket services for their child.



Summary of Recommendations

Learning Links has proposed the following recommendations for governments to consider.

1. Aligning Federal and State Funding for Equity

A comprehensive alignment of federal and state inclusion funding with NDIS Foundational Supports is essential to create a seamless, equitable system. Currently, inconsistencies across jurisdictions leave significant gaps in access to support. By integrating Foundational Supports with existing funded programs, governments can streamline service delivery, ensuring that all children, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status, have access to the multidisciplinary services they need to thrive.

2. Integrating Foundational Supports into a Multi-Tiered System

Central to addressing the wide range of developmental difficulties children face is the integration of NDIS Targeted Foundational Supports into a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in both early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings and schools.

This framework should be supported by needs-based funding and provides structured, tiered programs tailored to children's needs, from universal supports for all students to targeted and intensive supports for those requiring additional help.

Learning Links' evidence-based programs in schools already demonstrate the efficacy of this approach, particularly when allied health professionals collaborate with and coach educators to help children who struggle with learning build the foundational academic, social, and emotional skills they need.

See a Case Study on Learning Links' support in Campbellfield Public School in the Appendix.



Summary of Recommendations

3. Expanding Subsidies for Diagnostic and Specialist Services

To reduce financial barriers for families whose children need additional support outside of their educational setting, Medicare subsidies should cover diagnostic assessments and be extended to allow additional sessions for speech and occupational therapies, and mental health care than those currently available. Many children require more intensive or longer-term support, and current subsidies are inadequate. Additionally, new funding should support specialist tutoring programs tailored to specific learning and neurodevelopmental disorders that significantly affect learning, such as Dyslexia and ADHD. These programs would complement school-based learning support programs, ensuring that children receive the individualised guidance they need to achieve positive outcomes.

4. Strengthening Sector Integration and Parental Engagement

For NDIS Foundational Supports to succeed, integration across sectors must be strengthened to foster collaboration between ECEC settings, schools, service providers, and community organisations. Dedicated funding for coordination roles, or the “glue” would enable smoother service delivery, reduce administrative burdens on educators, and enhance parental engagement. With better collaboration, families can more easily access cohesive and effective services for their child that are tailored to their specific goals.

5. Supporting Families Through Specialist Providers

Specialist service providers with in-depth knowledge in their areas of expertise should be enabled to assist families in navigating the complexities of funding and support systems. Block funding for these providers would allow them to offer tailored information and guidance, community outreach, and referral services, ensuring families can access the right resources at the right time. This approach would reduce confusion and build parents’ confidence in advocating for their children.



Summary of Recommendations

6. Investing in Technology for Accessibility

Investments in technology would enhance service accessibility and efficiency. AI-driven tools and improved digital capacity for providers could simplify system navigation for families and expand the reach of online support programs. Subsidies for technology access would ensure equitable participation, especially for disadvantaged families.

7. Establishing a National Working with Children Check

A unified national Working with Children Check (WWCC) framework is vital to eliminate geographic constraints on service delivery. Consolidating state-based systems would streamline compliance, enabling specialist providers to expand into underserved areas and deliver consistent, high-quality support nationwide.

In summary, addressing the needs of children who face difficulties with learning through these targeted system and policy changes can ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

With Learning Links' decades of expertise as the foundation, these recommendations provide a clear roadmap for building an inclusive, equitable system that leaves no child behind.



Appendix

Case Study: Embedding Allied Health Support for Students Facing Difficulties in Campbellfield Public School

Learning Links has been working in partnership with Campbellfield Public School since 2018, providing speech therapy, psychology and numeracy programs for students facing difficulties with their communication development, social-emotional skills and learning, as well as professional learning and capacity building initiatives for teachers.

The strong relationship and approach to student support at this school is a wonderful example of how a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) with integrated allied health professionals provides holistic support to enhance student outcomes.

Campbellfield Public School is located in South Western Sydney. It has an enrolment of 380 students and celebrates a growing and harmonious multicultural diversity.

The school is committed to delivering quality teaching in a vibrant learning environment that ensures every student is known, valued and cared for. The school engages in strong Tier 1 evidence-based literacy and numeracy educational practices, 'Be You' wellbeing and Positive Behaviour for Learning programs, designed to purposefully enhance learning and academic achievement across all curriculum areas.

To complement these Tier 1 programs for all students, Learning Links' speech pathologists and psychologists have run targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 programs for children identified as facing difficulties for their learning. These have included:

- Tailored speech and language therapy
- Counselling
- Small group programs to address anxiety, making friends, behaviour and emotional regulation
- Learning Links' Counting for Life evidence-based numeracy program

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Appendix Cont.

Learning Links' programs supporting social-emotional skills are fully funded—funded through the Department of Social Services Communities for Children initiative, while Learning Links has gained funding through community and club partners, including Ingleburn RSL, to assist the school further and provide support for students with speech and language needs. This combined funding is enabling Learning Links to work in partnership with the learning support team to help over 100 students facing difficulties each year.

We recently spoke with the learning support team about the impact of the speech and language therapy program over the last five years.

Our main goal, and probably the goal of all schools is, to create bright students who interact in society and who are confident in what they know and can achieve anything they feel is possible.

Many students that come into Campbellfield PS have a range of needs. And what's going on at home could be so different case by case, student by student. A lot of schools need that extra level of specialised support to be able to provide the right learning environment for those students.

There are needs that must be met before our students can be successful learners, and a lot of those needs relate to speech and their understanding of language. We have children with many different communication challenges. Some of them have diagnosed disabilities. Some of them have possible disabilities but don't yet have a diagnosis.

For some children, because their difficulty is actually conversing with others, they can't participate in class and establish that real belonging with the school, which affects their learning. Speech therapy then helps them to be able to actually be a participant in their learning and to fully experience it.

Speech programs have been very important for our students because not all of them have access to speech therapy otherwise. It's been very important in providing guidance to us as teachers on how to develop strategies that really support children's growth and development.

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Appendix Cont.

Alongside direct support for students, Learning Links' speech pathologist supports teachers with professional learning, observation of students, identification of difficulties and coaching. This extends the effectiveness of her work by embedding the strategies into the classroom and allowing teachers to work closely with families to further extend the support into the home environment.

Working with the speech pathologist upskills all of the teachers to understand better how to support our students what scaffolds, what strategies where we target our needs and supports in the classroom.

It benefits staff on so many levels. The first one would be supporting individual students and helping us to identify students who need that intervention. Being able to understand what strategies are required and then being able to provide what's needed to help teachers to be able to progress children along that trajectory is incredibly valuable.

The speech pathologist then works with the teacher to be able to, at point of need, create a personalised plan for that child in acquiring language really day by day, week to week, and then throughout the year or throughout the time that they're going to be on the program. She also provides professional learning and coaching to all of our staff so that we can upskill our teachers in understanding those concepts and the skills that they can use in the classroom.

Working with Learning Links, you can see that speech pathology is so clearly linked to what we do in schools. We use language every day. That's how we communicate with everyone. But there is a lot of room to grow our knowledge, space to grow our understanding and improve how we work with our students.