



SDN Children's Services

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Submission to 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005

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1. Executive Summary

This submission from SDN Children's Services is based on our experience as a provider of inclusive early childhood education and care since 1905, Children's Therapies as a registered NDIS Provider and other support to families, as well as feedback from 63 families of children with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) engaged in our services.

2. About the SDN Group (SDN)

SDN Children's Services is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1905 and is one of Australia's most experienced and trusted leaders in mainstream early education and childcare, disability services for children, and family support. The SDN Group includes a wholly-owned subsidiary, SDN Child and Family Services Pty Ltd.

Our purpose is to promote and enhance children's wellbeing, learning and development in inclusive environments. We provide high-quality inclusive early childhood education and care in 22 long day care centres, two mainstream preschools and one autism-specific preschool, children's therapies that are clinic and home and community based, and family support. We seek to build strong connections within communities, challenge discrimination and help remove barriers to full inclusion.

We believe in the rights of children as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and are committed to social and educational inclusion. Through our strategy we seek to enhance the wellbeing of children and to make sure that children facing challenges have a place in the services we operate, support and advocate for.

We operate an integrated model of service delivery using our Pathways Approach that brings together our expertise in mainstream and specialised service delivery. In all, around 5,000 children, families and other service providers benefit from SDN's work each year.

We have many years of experience partnering with families with children with disability or developmental delay. We are a registered NDIS Provider and offer therapies for children from early childhood until transition to high school, with 60% of current clients having autism.

SDN welcomes children with disability into our mainstream early childhood education and care centres and preschools, with a strong focus on inclusive education. Our SDN Beranga Autism Specific Preschool in Rooty Hill, NSW, supports families to engage in early childhood education and care and therapy for children with a diagnosis of autism. There is a high demand for the service and vulnerable families and children at risk are prioritised for access.

SDN was selected by the NDIA to trial the Early Childhood Early intervention (ECEI) approach in the Nepean Blue Mountains in NSW and provided NDIS transitional services funded by the NSW Government across metropolitan Sydney from 2017 to 2018. The NDIA also selected SDN as one of two ECEI Transition Advisors to mentor and coach early intervention organisations across NSW.

SDN was an Australian Government funded Inclusion Support Agency from 2006-2012 in NSW and the ACT.

More information about SDN is available at: www.sdn.org.au

3. Families' experiences: the literature

Parents of children with a disability often report high levels of stress and mental health issues associated with the challenges of raising a child with complex needs (Weiss, Wingsong & Lunskey

2014¹; Hsiao Y-J 2018²). These issues are often compounded by having to navigate multiple service sectors to address the specific needs of their children. Many parents have difficulty sustaining regular work due to problems with accessing and sustaining quality childcare. Mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) report greater emotional problems compared with mothers of children with intellectual disability without ASD and compared with mothers of typically developing children (Totsika et al., 2011³). Evidence also suggests that elevated stress and related impact on parent and child psychological wellbeing indirectly affect parenting behaviour and child outcomes.

The stressors families with a child with an ASD face include:

- Being asked to remove their child from an early childhood education and care or school situation because the educators could no longer manage (White et al. 2012⁴);
- Being told frequently that their child has lost control, threatened or hurt someone (White et al. 2012);
- Receiving frequent phone calls from school or early learning (White et al. 2012);
- Higher medical expenses compared to children without an ASD due to high comorbidity of psychiatric and behavioural disorders in children with an ASD (McCarthy, 2007⁵);
- The added strain of day-to-day care responsibilities and the time required to attend health appointments;
- Having difficulty accessing or sustaining work as work being dependent on the availability of appropriate and affordable early childhood education and care and after school care (Loynes, 2001⁶);
- Lack of financial resources due to inconsistency of work and then the compounding stressors that result from poverty including unsustainable housing, poor nutrition and compromised safety and wellbeing.

Studies that have examined the experience of crisis in families of people with an ASD found that child behaviour was the most frequent subtheme (Weiss, Wingsiong & Lunsy 2014). Child behaviour in children with a disability is the most consistent predictor of parental stress, marital breakdown and decisions to seek out of home care (Novita Children's Services, 2014⁷; Nankervis et al 2011⁸).

4. The role of high-quality early childhood education and care

Well-established research continues to emphasise the importance of early childhood education and care as an essential building block of a child's future success, with children more likely to complete year 12 and be less likely to repeat grades or require additional support, have higher levels of

¹ Weiss, J.A., Wingsiong, A., & Lunsy, Y. (2014). Defining crisis in families of individuals with autism spectrum disorders. *Autism*. Nov; 18(8): 985-995.

² Hsiao Y-J.(2018) Parental Stress in Families of Children With Disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic*. 53(4):201-205

³ Totsika, V., Hastings, R.P., Emerson, E., Lancaster, G.A., Berridge, et al. (2013). Is there a bidirectional relationship between maternal wellbeing and child behavior problems in autism spectrum disorders? Longitudinal analysis of a population-defined sample of young children. *Autism Research*. June 6(3):201-211

⁴ White, S.E., McMorris, C., Weiss, J.A., et al. (2012). The experience of crisis in families of individuals with autism spectrum disorder across the lifespan. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 21(3): 457-465.

⁵ McCarthy, J. (2007). Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and intellectual disability: current opinion. *Psychiatry* 20(5): 472-476

⁶ Loynes, F. (2001) *The impact of autism: a report compiled for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism*.

⁷ Novita Children's Services (2014). *Supporting families: factors contributing to children and young people with disability living in voluntary out-of-home care*. The Department of Communities and Social Inclusion, South Australia.

⁸ Nankervis, K., Rosewarne, A. & Vassos, M. (2011). Why do families relinquish care? An investigation of the factors that lead to relinquishment into out-of-home respite care. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*. Vol. 55(4). 422-433.

employment, income and financial security, improved health outcomes and reduced crime. (Pascoe,S. & Brennan, D. 2017⁹; The Front Project, 2019¹⁰)

Some forms of early childhood education and care, such as long day care, integrate early childhood education and care within a day long enough to enable family members to work, study, volunteer or care for other dependent family members, therefore contributing to the overall wellbeing of the family.

5. Key terms

Australia has a national quality framework for early childhood education and care. This framework and the associated standard and regulations apply to both preschools and long day care.

For the purpose of this submission the term early childhood education and care (ECEC) is used to include preschool (shorter day, school terms, children in the year or two years prior to compulsory school) and long day care (integrating education with a longer day for working families for children 6 weeks to school age).

6. Children with disability in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

While the numbers of children with disabilities enrolled in ECEC in Australia has increased, the data does not tell us the key factors of family income (affordability), enrolment and attendance rates (dosage), quality of service (efficacy), and service ‘hopping’ (effort). Anecdotally families report that significant effort is required from them to find a suitable ECEC place, that additional demands are made of them (eg. extra charges) and that they are asked to keep their child at home when there are excursions and special events.

In order to know whether the Standards have contributed towards children with disability being able to access ECEC on the same basis as children without disabilities a clearer picture of the current state needs to be obtained.

Recommendation 1

That a clearer picture of the ECEC experiences of children with disability and their families be obtained with the inclusion of the following measures:

- Family income
- Percentage of children with disabilities enrolled for less than the recommended 15 hours per week minimum for more than one year
- Attendance rates as compared to enrolment rates, compared to children without disability
- Percentage of children with disabilities enrolled in high quality ECEC (Exceeding the National Quality Standard) as assessed by the Regulatory Authority against the National Quality Standard quality areas.
- Number of rejections per child by ECEC centres prior to confirming an enrolment
- Rates of enrolment breakdown (child asked to leave; families dissatisfied with service)

7. Who must comply with the Standards

The standard clearly sets out that preschools and kindergartens must comply with the Standards.

However, many ECEC providers (particularly not-for-profit) offer both stand alone preschools and long day care, meaning that parts of an organisation must comply and the other need not.

⁹ Pascoe, S. & Brennan, D. (2017). Lifting our game: report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions.

¹⁰ The Front Project. (2019). A smart investment for a smarter Australia.

Organisations such as SDN take the approach that all services comply regardless of the narrow scope of the Standards.

However, some providers may use the scope of the Standards to justify poor practice.

Recommendation 2

That the scope be widened to include approved ECEC providers following a review of any possible unintended consequences from this change of scope.

8. SDN responses to questions for early childhood educators and providers

Admission and access

SDN:

- Has access and inclusion embedded in policies and procedures including a Priority of Access policy and procedure
- Family partnership meetings are embedded into routine practice

Participation

SDN:

- understands its obligations for making reasonable adjustments to ensure a child with disability can participate in ECEC including supporting access to the curriculum and to the facilities.
- has an accessibility action plan
- has experience consulting with families and making reasonable adjustments

Supporting children

SDN has supported children with disability during their participation in ECEC through:

- accessing additional financial and other resources,
- subsidising costs of an additional educator,
- offering scholarships to reduce out of pocket cost for families;
- working with the family and other practitioners (eg allied health) in a Team around the Child by supporting Educator time off the floor.

Compliance

There have been a small number of occasions where families have said that SDN was not meeting their needs. All instances have been where individual Educators have not managed a complex situation as well as they could have. We addressed these matters by seeking to understand the family's concerns by listening and empathising and addressing the issues to the satisfaction of the families, by increasing Educator awareness of obligations and by developing new tools to support Educators.

Transition

Transition experiences are highly variable and are particularly dependent on the attitude and skills of the receiving school leadership. Many families still prefer transition into support classes rather than mainstream. Anecdotally this is because families have more confidence in the abilities and attitudes of the staff.

Information sharing between ECEC and the receiving schools is also important. SDN chooses to use the NSW Department of Education Transition to School Statement for children with and without disabilities. <https://www.transitiontoschool.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/NSW-Transition-to-School-Statement.pdf>

This document records the child’s interests, strengths and preferred ways of learning in their year prior to school. Its purpose is to assist early childhood educators, parents/carers and primary school teachers to better understand the child and how best to support their transition from ECEC to school. The Statement includes input from the child and from the family.

Not all receiving teachers read these Statements but engagement with them in NSW is increasing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with disability

SDN has supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have ASD in SDN Beranga autism-specific pre-school.

Word of mouth has been particularly important as the local community uses their networks to know who to trust.

Factors that have helped families to feel that they can trust us include demonstrating recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia’s First Nations people and using family-centred approaches. It is our responsibility as a provider to show that we can be trusted to not judge and to increase our consciousness of our biases and assumptions and to manage them. This is always a work in progress.

SDN also offers scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to make ECEC affordable for families.

9. Key drivers for access and participation of children with disabilities in ECEC

| | | |
|---|----------------|--|
| 1 | WILL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs and values of the Provider lead from the top and embedded in organisational culture and policies and procedures • Selection of staff based on alignment with those beliefs and values. • Attitudes towards application of those beliefs and values when setting goals, making decisions and allocating resources. • Support provided to achieve equity • Obligations and expectations included in individual Position Descriptions |
| 2 | SKILL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active listening and ability to co-design a plan • Obtaining knowledge of the child and family experience and capabilities • Technical knowledge about how children learn through play and relationships • Individual teaching skills gained through both undergraduate and in-service learning |
| 3 | RESOURCES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical resources that support access • Financial resources for reasonable modifications including additional educators • Access to professional development including backfill • Access to specialist advice • Access to specialist behaviour support plans |
| 4 | ACCOUNTABILITY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and inclusion key performance indicators at organisational and individual level. • Clearly defined measures • Reporting: internal and external • Continuous improvement mindset |

10. Families' experiences: case study of the benefits of an integrated service

Feedback from families identifies many challenges and criticisms of the services and support available. However, innovative wrap-around services to support families with a wholistic approach have been very effective in addressing families' needs.

In 2011, SDN was funded by the NSW Government to establish SDN Beranga as an Autism Early Years Demonstration Service with two parts:

1. A long day care centre for 24 children aged between 2-6 years with ASD per day (Lighthouse Centre). The centre prioritised children at risk and vulnerable families.
2. Outreach services to 13 childcare centres operated by a range of providers (Satellite Centres) that were supported to develop autism-specific practices.

Our model was built on 3 layers of practice:

- high quality early childhood education and care practices
- best practice early childhood intervention strategies, and
- combined autism-specific approaches.

SDN contracted an external consultant to build and test a model for monetising the benefits of SDN Beranga in the long day care and satellite program format. The modelling used publicly available costing information and SDN estimates of out of home care conversions and escalations from our experience in working with children at Beranga.

This analysis showed that the long day care and satellite program model yielded benefits in three areas which it was possible to "monetise" in the short-medium term:

1. Reduced need for special education in favour of education in a supported environment in a mainstream school.
2. Reductions in child safety investigations and child removals into OOHC.
3. For children already in OOHC when arriving at SDN Beranga, a cessation of escalation into higher intensity out-of-home care costs.

The projected possible financial payback to the state government for these three areas was estimated at over \$15.2 million per year. This demonstrated the clear economic and social benefits of operating such a service for families, the community and governments.

The cessation of NSW funding for SDN's Beranga at the end of the 2017/2018 financial year created a significant shortfall in funds available to sustainably operate and necessitated a transition to a community preschool for 3-5 year old children with ASD without a satellite program. The change to the model meant that the level of support we could provide to families was reduced, and therefore the potential financial benefits to governments were also reduced.

11. Conclusion

The DDA and the Disability Education Standards set the expectations and obligations for education providers.

SDN supports the widening of the scope of the Standards to include ECEC.

However, as not enough is known about the current state of the access and participation of children with disabilities in ECEC, SDN recommends additional data is required to obtain a clearer picture of the current state in order to measure improvement in response to any changes to the Standards.

Knowing a Providers obligations under the law is only one part of improving the access and participation of children with disabilities in ECEC.

SDN recommends that investment is required to influence the will, skill, resourcing and accountability of providers in order to achieve change.

12. For further information:

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