

## Submission to Thriving Kids: Building Capacity in Early Childhood Settings

Submitted by:

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### Overview

As the NSW Government prepares to launch *Thriving Kids*, we urge decision-makers to recognise early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings particularly childcare and preschool environments as critical spaces for embedding therapy supports and building developmental capacity. These settings are not only where children spend significant time due to family work commitments, but they also offer rich opportunities for learning through play, social interaction, group instruction, and routine all essential foundations for school readiness.

### Why Early Childhood Settings Matter

- **Natural Learning Environments:** Childcare and preschool settings allow for real-time, group-based learning of social, emotional, and cognitive skills. These environments are ideal for embedding therapy supports in ways that are developmentally appropriate and socially inclusive.
- **School Readiness:** Without targeted support in the 3–5 age range, children with developmental delays and Level 1 or 2 Autism risk entering school without the foundational skills they need. This places additional pressure on the education system and limits long-term outcomes for children.
- **Working Families:** Many children attend ECEC settings because their families need to work. These settings must be equipped to support developmental needs without placing unrealistic expectations on educators alone.

### Current Gaps and Risks

- **Inclusion Funding Limitations:** While inclusion funding is valuable, it does not provide access to the specialised skill sets of allied health professionals, key workers, and special educators. These professionals are essential for delivering targeted interventions within ECEC settings.
- **Under-recognised Roles:** The NDIS has overlooked the unique contributions of key workers and special educators particularly those with master's-level qualifications. These professionals are trained to work across developmental domains and are well-positioned to deliver support in community-based, group settings.
- **Systemic Pressure:** If Thriving Kids does not invest in building capacity within early childhood settings, we risk further straining an already stretched sector and missing a crucial window for early intervention.

## **A Proven, Scalable Model: North Ryde Community Preschool's Multi-Tiered Early Intervention System**

North Ryde Community Preschool is a local community-based service with a longstanding commitment to creating inclusive environments for children with additional needs. Historically, however, their capacity to support these children was limited by funding constraints, staffing and clinical expertise in special education and early intervention.

In 2023, North Ryde Preschool partnered with Learn My Way to co-design and implement a comprehensive early intervention program. Over the past three years, this collaboration has led to the development of an embedded model that integrates therapy supports directly within the preschool setting.

Grounded in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), the model offers a flexible framework that enables educators and therapists to respond to each child's developmental and learning needs with the right level of support, at the right time without waiting for behaviours or challenges to escalate.

We currently support 35 children with additional needs, many of whom would be directly eligible for Thriving Kids. These children are thriving not because of isolated clinical sessions, but because therapy is embedded into the environments where they learn, play, and grow.

### **What Our Model Offers**

Through MTSS, we deliver a continuum of services that includes:

- **Supported Playgroups:** For children and families to build foundational skills in inclusive, community-based settings, creating a safe space for children and families to connect and share experiences and offer support. This is led by an Educator and Psychologist.
- **Social Skills & School Readiness Groups:** Teaching peer interaction, conversation skills, task completion, fine motor skills and classroom routines
- **Intensive Early Intervention:** High-frequency, targeted support across developmental domains for children with complex needs. The intervention team work alongside the educators two days a week from 8:30-3:30pm offering therapy supports across all key learning areas.
- **Consultations & Coaching:** For families and educators to extend learning into the home and community
- **Embedded Therapy Throughout the Day:** Delivered by therapists and educators working side-by-side with the natural environment (versus pull out style therapy or weekly consultation)

This model is not theoretical it's operational, inclusive, and delivering measurable outcomes.

### **Skill Development in Natural Environments**

Our model supports skill development in group-based settings alongside peers which supports children with their essential skills and school readiness skills. These skills are not taught in isolation they are embedded into everyday preschool experiences, routines, and peer interactions. This ensures that learning is meaningful, generalisable, and affirming of each child's unique strengths.

We focus on the following developmental domains:

- **Communication**
  - Supporting expressive, receptive, and alternative communication methods, this supports the child to communicate their needs and wants, respond to peer interactions and promote self-advocacy across multiple communication partners.
- **Play and Engagement**
  - Expanding play repertoires and supporting sustained engagement and expanding play interests
  - Facilitated across sensory, symbolic, constructive, and social play experiences
- **Friendships and Social Skills**
  - Building peer relationships, turn-taking, joint attention, and emotional regulation
  - Practised throughout the day alongside their peers, coaching also the peers in how to sustain play and engagement
- **Group-Based Instruction**
  - Supporting participation in small and large group learning
  - Responding to group instruction and attending to teacher instruction
- **Transitions and Routines**
  - Teaching crucial transition and co-operation skills so children learn to follow the preschool routine
  - Addressing behaviours such as absconding and location safety so the child knows which areas they can access throughout the day
- **Engagement Across Educators and Settings**
  - Encouraging flexible engagement with multiple adults and environments
  - Promoting generalisation of skills across the preschool day, teaching our children to engage and respond to a variety of educators and upskilling educators to implement therapy supports to support daily interactions
- **Self-Help and Independence**
  - Supporting toileting, feeding, dressing, and other adaptive skills.
  - Generalising self-help skills from home to a preschool group-based setting

### **What Makes It Work**

Our team includes:

- **Board Certified Behaviour Analysts (BCBAs)** who guide skill-based intervention and coach educators in evidence-based strategies

- **Key Workers** who coordinate services and maintain continuity across home, preschool, and allied health settings
- **Special Educators** with master's-level qualifications who deliver targeted instruction and adapt learning environments to meet diverse developmental needs
- **Early Childhood Educators**, including room leaders and inclusion educators, who receive ongoing training in inclusive practices and work collaboratively with therapists to embed strategies into daily routines and play-based learning

Together, they work within the preschool day, embedding therapy into routines, transitions, and play. This fosters generalisation of skills, builds educator confidence, and ensures children receive consistent, responsive support.

### Impact and Outcomes

This model:

- **Builds capacity among educators and families** through coaching, shared planning, and consistent communication
- **Delivers measurable developmental gains** in communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and adaptive skills
- **Prepares children for school** with reduced reliance on intensive supports, easing the transition and promoting long-term inclusion
- **Fosters true collaboration** between disciplines, breaking down barriers and creating shared understanding of each child's needs

### Funding Realities and Systemic Challenges

Our model has been sustained through a combination of inclusion funding and individual NDIS plans. However, the NDIS component has become increasingly difficult to navigate:

- Many families now receive reduced plans focused solely on weekly OT or speech sessions, which in isolation is not meeting the needs of children requiring intensive, multidisciplinary support
- There is limited support for collaboration between allied health teams and educators, despite its critical role in ensuring consistency and generalisation
- The system lacks flexibility to adjust supports based on a child's changing needs, placing pressure on families and educators to coordinate care without adequate resources
- The funding we received for our playgroup has now closed so these free services outside of the NDIS is now at risk but is one of the key areas raised in Thriving Kids. It raises the issue of what happens to support that are now in place and at risk of ending as no funding model is available.

### Why Thriving Kids Must Build on This Model

Thriving Kids must move away from a one-size-fits-all model and embrace a tiered approach that allows supports to increase or decrease based on developmental need not diagnosis alone and does not require an appeal process to reassess funding needs. Services need the flexibility to increase and

decrease support as needed and not make families wait for funding increases and long appeal processes as the “waiting game” does not only place added stress to families but also leaves the child without the support they need leading to a decrease in skills and an increase in behaviours.

It must:

- Recognise the critical role of key workers and special educators, especially those with master’s-level qualifications
- Support providers to prepare for this shift in funding and be transparent so we can plan for service delivery and changes need to be made to maintain business and service viability
- Fund transdisciplinary teams to work within early childhood settings
- Prioritise the 3–5 age range, where foundational skills are built and long-term outcomes are shaped
- Support collaborative planning between families, educators, and allied health professionals
- Embed therapy into natural learning environments, not isolate it in clinical settings

North Ryde Community Preschool has shown that this model works. It’s scalable, inclusive, and responsive. With the right support, we can expand it, sustain it, and ensure more children get the start they deserve not just in theory, but in practice.

#### **Recommendations for Thriving Kids**

1. Recognise Early Childhood Settings as key delivery sites for early intervention
2. Fund multidisciplinary teams including special educators and key workers to work within these settings
3. Prioritise the 3–5 age range for targeted developmental support
4. Ensure funding models reflect the intensity of support required for children with developmental delays and Level 1–2 Autism
5. Build sustainable capacity in the ECEC sector through training, collaboration, and embedded supports

North Ryde Community Preschool’s early intervention model demonstrates what is possible when therapy is embedded into early childhood settings through a multi-tiered system of supports. With educators, therapists, key workers, and families working together as transdisciplinary teams, we’ve created a responsive, inclusive environment that prepares children for school and life. Thriving Kids has the opportunity to build on this foundation recognising the unique role of early childhood educators, funding transdisciplinary teams within community settings, and ensuring that every child receives the support they need, where they need it most. The time to invest in scalable, collaborative, and inclusive early childhood solutions is now.

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