

MEDIA RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

2 November 2025

From Fear to Hope: “A Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity to Get It Right for Our Kids”

Australian Autism Alliance response to The Advertisers Questions:

Question 1: How is the system working at the moment?

“The current system is not working.

The Thriving Kids program relies on diverting children into mainstream systems that multiple national reviews – the **Senate Inquiry into Autism (2022)**, **Disability Royal Commission (2023)**, and the **NDIS Review (2023)** – have all found to be *not fit-for-purpose and broken*.

There are major accountability gaps, with people being *handballed between systems* and falling through the cracks. Implementation plans to fix these systems are still in their infancy.

So when families are told a *new* system is coming, it feels like history repeating – being redirected into an undefined process, without clear guarantees that support will be **suitable, affordable, accessible, and available**, precisely when *early intervention matters most*.

From our **Thriving Kids Community Pulse Survey**:

- **91%** are not in favour of, or are undecided about, the Thriving Kids program, citing a lack of trustworthy detail and authentic co-design.
- **81%** fear children and families will lose essential NDIS supports and be handballed between broken systems – and this will create significant, complex and ongoing economic problems for Australian Governments, due to the lifelong impacts of their removal. Families fear their children being placed into systems that are under-trained, under-resourced, and unaccountable, and are deeply concerned by language that frames their children as burdens instead of as precious and capable.

This announcement also comes at a time of widespread hardship – a cost-of-living crisis, housing stress, and negative NDIS impacts from recent legislative changes.

The **Senate Inquiry into Autism** found that the biggest barrier to inclusion is a *lack of autism knowledge, skills, and confidence across the system*. The current statistics include outcomes such as Autistic preschoolers are **10 times more likely** to be permanently excluded from preschool.

Our Thriving Kids Survey response indicated:

- **89%** say current state systems can't deliver what's promised; many share stories of system failure and their experiences drive additional fears of forced change.
- **73%** stress that trusted, skilled and resourced specialist providers are critical to hope and chances for a successful progression through childhood and beyond”.

Question 2: What needs to be reformed?

“The **Australian Autism Alliance** outlined 15 key steps in our *Thriving Kids* submission. But the most urgent reform is *to our thinking* — coupled with genuine *ecosystem reform*.

We cannot keep patching short-term fixes driven by short-term cost narratives. That only repeats the mistakes of the past. Nor should we frame the solution as an either/or proposition this creating a two-tier system where only children with the highest needs are supported properly.

We all agree every child is precious and children are our future. Early support is not a luxury — it is a **right** that all children have in Australia.

Mainstream and community systems are not yet equipped to deliver what children need — that is one of the reasons why the **NDIS** was created 13 years ago. If we have not solved these problems in over a decade, it is unrealistic to think we can do so in 12 months, half of which is taken up by inquiry and investigation.

To go fast, we must first go slow and get the design right.

Thriving Kids can be the trigger for a **once-in-a-generation opportunity** to build the system properly — together.

Government already holds the key ingredients for success, starting with a Minister responsible for several interconnected portfolios. But this will only work if we put **rights, co-design, evidence, and safeguards** first, underpinned by **building a universal system where there is accountable, integrated governance framework with a safe vertical and horizontal transition plan**.

Government must use its levers to ensure oversight of the entire program **with joint horizontal and vertical cross-government outcomes** to strengthen education, health, and employment systems and ensure accountability so this investment can be realised. Accountability will be supported by embedding **enforceable human-rights obligations, real-time resolution pathways, public reporting, and consequences for non-compliance**. This should also extend to good market stewardship for accountability of providers.

A truly universal system means government takes responsibility to ensure:

- The **Right Door** – with appropriate, available, affordable, accessible supports;
- From the **Right Quality (Source)** – qualified/verified and trusted providers;
- At the **Right Quantity** – fit-for-person (individualised with genuine choice and control).

This shifts the burden from individuals and families onto governments – who control the systems and outcomes. At the heart is co-building **with Autistic people** and their families, **rather than for** them, will truly deliver thriving futures for those it claims to serve”.

Question 3: How can we ensure the NDIS is value for money but still helps kids, especially those with Autism?

“We must stop thinking in terms of *“one lifeboat at a time”*”.

Right now, the NDIS is referred to as the only boat in the ocean. The proposed Thriving Kids program risks becoming the only lifeboat for children with mild to moderate needs.

What we need is **a universal system where supports can be switched on and off as needs change, effectively raising the tide so all boats rise together – mainstream, community, and NDIS.** Supports should switch on and off as needs change, giving families safety, flexibility, and hope. This way people are surrounded by safe options that are effective and government through accountability is managing and monitoring the harbour.

Over time, we can transition out of the harbour as we build a **superhighway** with seamless transition between systems. This avoiding the creation of a sea of lost potential where people are left without access to any feasible boat and relying on the individual and their families to do the heavy lifting.

While the NDIS reform aims for sustainability, cost-shifting between systems only hides the problem. The long-term social and economic costs of poor design are far greater. I call this the **“Australian Lost Potential Tax”** – the hidden price we will all pay if we don’t act now.

Individuals and families are being unfairly blamed for NDIS costs and much of what is being put in place is controlling at best. The real issue is system design. Individuals and families live in *fear of scarcity* — that individual’s needs will be capped, that the right door won’t be open, or that behind that door won’t be safe, informed, consistent hands so once again they fall through gaps between systems with no control at all to purchase supports. And when government systems fail it has been proven through the Disability Royal Commission that there is unrecoverable harm and trauma.

When individuals and families know there is a reliable, safe, and personalised pathway — a system that is both generalised and inclusive that can switch on fit-for-person supports (**the right individualised support, at the right time, in the right way** — they stop clinging to scarcity and start *thriving* - participate, and contributing alongside the rest of the society.

It's like trapeze artists who want to avoid harm. Safety nets must be in place before individuals and families are told to let go of what currently holds them.

Hence provide an **immediate commitment to no-gap support protections** to rebuild trust that the system is working *with* individuals and families, not *against* them. **This has the downstream benefit for everyone else in the scheme also who are living with the “fear of scarcity”**

Key also will be that government has vertical and horizontal integrated transition plans with levers:

- Between Federal Cross Government Departments;
- Between Federal and States and Territories; and
- Between the NDIS, States/Territories, Mainstream Systems and Individuals/Families to ensure transitioning of knowledge and continuity of supports if they are no longer to be supported through NDIS in the future.

Otherwise, the investment already made through the NDIS risks becoming a **sunk cost** and children are forced back into the scheme when other systems fail.

This is a **once-in-a-generation opportunity** to move from *fear to hope* together— and ensure **all children can thrive”**.

About the Australian Autism Alliance: We are the national peak body furthering the rights and interests of Autistic people across the life span, their parents and carers, and the autism community in Australia. The members represent a cohesive national network of key organisations with a diverse focus on autism. For more information about Australian Autism Alliance go to: australianautismalliance.org.au and connect with us on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

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